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THIRD SEPTEMBER NUMBER

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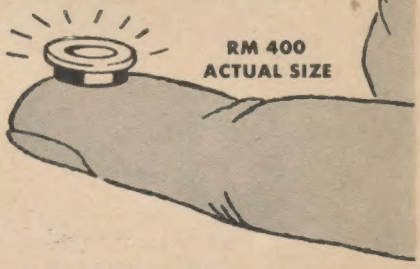

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September 21, 1956
Volume 200, No. 3

RANCH ROMANCES

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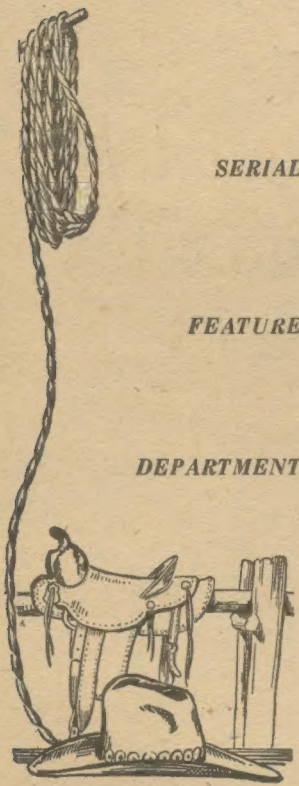

HELEN TONO
Editor

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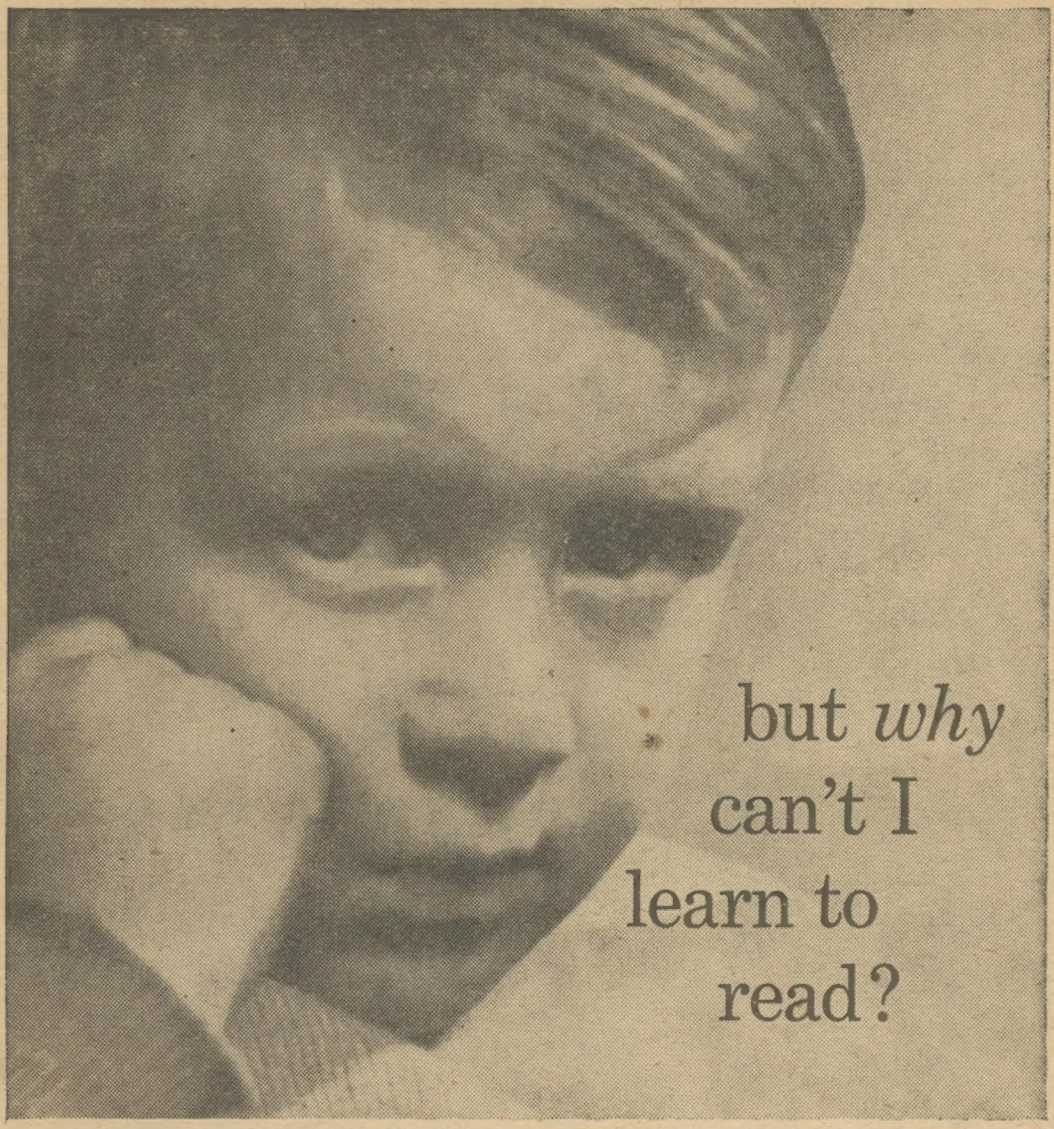

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The Drifter

Dear Editor:

Can a drifting construction worker borrow some space in your column? I am 22 years old, 5'8" tall, weigh 141 lbs., and have brown hair. My hobbies include reading, traveling, camping and hiking. Would like to hear from girls between the ages of 16 and 30. I'll try to answer all letters I receive.

PAUL LEASURE

38 15th Street
Wheeling, West Virginia

Young Mother

Dear Editor:

Will you please enter my name in "Our Air Mail?" I am a young widow who gets awfully lonesome. I have a four-month-old girl and I stay with her most of the time. So please drop me a few lines to fill my lonely hours.

CORINNE GRAY

P.O. Box 146
Gunnison, Colorado

Navy Blues

Dear Editor:

I am just a lonely sailor who has been in Uncle Sam's Navy for about four years. I am 24 years old, 5'7" tall, weigh 140 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes. My favorite sports are baseball, bowling, football, basketball, fishing and hunting. Also like to go to the movies, and to dance a bit. Will answer all letters, and will exchange snapshots.

RAYMOND E. KINGSON

SSS-38-43
USS New Jersey BB-62
c/o F.P.O. New York, N. Y.

Collector

Dear Editor:

I would like to correspond with people between the ages of 35 and 40 in the United States or Canada. I am 47 years old, 5'8" tall, and have blue eyes. I collect stamps, coins, and snapshots. I am also very fond of outdoor life, particularly camping.

PAUL W. FINLAURSON

203 Dease Street
Fort William, Ont.
Canada

Two Teen Sisters

Dear Editor:

We are two sisters who faithfully read "Our Air Mail" and would like very much to receive letters from girls and boys between the ages of 15 and 20. Pat is 15 years old, 5'4" tall, with black hair and blue eyes. Betty is 14 years old, 5'2" tall, with brown hair and hazel eyes. We both like to write letters, dance, and listen to popular records.

PAT AND BETTY STRAUSS

19060 Delaware
Roseville, Michigan

Truck Driver With a Tale

Dear Editor:

I am a long-distance truck driver who hauls freight from coast to coast. It sure gets lonesome out on the road in the wee small hours of the morning. I've got many a yarn to spin, so aren't there some gals who would care to listen? I'm 47 years old, 5'10½" tall, weigh 160 lbs., and have chestnut hair and blue eyes. Let's get acquainted.

JOHN SMALL

711 Camp Street
New Orleans, Louisiana

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 31 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Interesting Youth

Dear Editor:

I would very much like to receive letters from men or women who are in the Navy, and from people of Indian descent, particularly Cherokees. I am 12 years old, weigh 90 lbs., am 4'8" tall, and have brown eyes. I can play the piano, trumpet, tuba, and violin a bit. My hobbies include riding horses, fishing, collecting rocks and coins and playing basketball. Also I like to take care of animals.

DAVID PORTER

301 N. 12th Street
Belen, New Mexico

Mature Baby Sitter

Dear Editor:

I am a widow and do a lot of baby sitting, so I get very lonesome at times as I don't go out much. I am 53 years old, and have dark brown hair and blue eyes. I'd like to hear from men and women all over the land.

SARAH WEST

2611 Exeter Street
Dallas, Texas

Real Small Town

Dear Editor:

I live in a small town with only three stores in it, so there isn't much of a chance for me to meet boys and girls my own age. I am 16 years old, 5'6" tall, weigh 145 lbs., and have blond hair. My hobby is fishing. Would like to hear from boys and girls from all over the world.

LEVON WEST

Box 47
Funston, Georgia

Wants Unusual Chums

Dear Editor:

I would like to correspond with pen pals in small and out-of-the-way foreign countries. I am 19 years old, 6'3" tall, and weigh 200 lbs. My hobbies include stamp collecting, swimming and hiking.

DOUGLAS E. ADAMS

Box 132
Whiteleld, New Hampshire

Curious

Dear Editor:

Is there room in your magazine for a girl from the tall corn state of Iowa? I am 12 years old, 5' tall, and have long blonde hair and blue eyes. I like dancing, horseback riding, swimming and basketball. Come on and write to me. I'll also exchange photos.

CAROLYN DERBY

Route I
Delta, Iowa

Music Lover

Dear Editor:

Here's hoping you'll enter my plea for some new friends. I am 27 years old, 5'9" tall, weigh 148 lbs., and have black hair and brown eyes. I am a great lover of music, and I also like to dance and to indulge in sports. I'll be on the lookout for a lot of letters.

MANNIE VIERA

50 Phillips Avenue
New Bedford, Mass.

Up North

Dear Editor:

I am working some 200 miles from home, for a pulp construction company. Recreation here is liimted, and so I find it very lonely. I am 21 years old, 5'9" tall, weigh 170 lbs., and have curly hair. Would like to hear from young men and women about my age. I promise to answer all letters, and will exchange snaps.

GEORGE ROBAK

Box 101
Hinton, Alberta,
Canada

Dear Editor:

Lady Fisherman

Dear Editor:

Here I am again. I tried once before to make your column, and hope I succeed this time. I am a widow and am a regular fisherman. I am 56 years old, 5'5" tall, weigh 124 lbs., and have gray hair and brown eyes. Have lots of hobbies, and enjoy all outdoor sports. I'd like to hear from people about my own age.

MRS. JAMES WELLS

1824 Bynum Street
West Durham, North Carolina

Lonely Guy

Dear Editor:

I am very lonely, and it would cheer me up if I could have some pen pals. I am 24 years old, stand 5'10", weigh 160 lbs., and have black hair and gray eyes. Will be looking forward to receiving a lot of letters from many different types of people.

CLARENCE VANCE

24 Highland Circle
Little Rock, Arkansas

The Outdoor Type

Dear Editor:

I am 29 years old, 5'6" tall, and have light brown hair and blue eyes. I like rodeos, swimming and almost all sports. Most of my work is in the woods, and I enjoy this because I like the outdoors. I also like to look at T.V. Would enjoy making some Western pals.

ERNEST TABER

830 S.W. 5th Street
Pendleton, Oregon

Curls Up With RANCH ROMANCES

Dear Editor:

I read your magazine very often and find it just right for a nice comfortable evening of good reading. I am 43 years old, but folks always think I look younger. I love music and play the piano, accordion, and several other instruments. I used to be in orchestras when I was younger. I really like to write letters, and would appreciate hearing from people of all ages.

MARGE MOCHINSKI

1014 Emerson Avenue No.
Minneapolis 11, Minnesota

Agrees With Us

Dear Editor:

I was looking at your air mail column and think it is a good way to make pen pals. I hope you can find room in your magazine for me. I am 16 years old, 5'3" tall, weigh 125 lbs., and have brown hair and blue eyes. I live on a farm and get very lonely. Will answer all letters, and will also be glad to exchange snapshots.

ARCHIE PADGETT

Box 376 R #4
Swanton, Ohio

Another Country

Dear Editor:

This is my first try at getting into "Our Air Mail" and I hope I am successful. I am 21 years old, 5'3" tall, weigh 135 lbs., and have black hair. My hobbies include swimming, music, dancing and writing. Would like to correspond with anyone, so come on, boys and girls, give a poor guy a break.

CLYDE DEEKES

Nurse Land
Carrington's Village
St. Michael, Barbados
B.W.I.

Wants Pen Partners

Dear Editor:

I am a fond reader of your magazine and would like to same some pen pals. I am 24 years old, 5'8" tall, weigh 135 lbs., and have dark wavy hair and brown eyes. Would especially like to hear from cowboys in the West, but anyone will be welcome.

LARRY FARRAR

Box 11
Truckee, California

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TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

TWO teen-aged boys made no bones about their mission while driving along the streets of Grand Rapids, Mich. In the windows of their car were signs reading: "Girl wanted."

TOSSING a coin decided a city council election in Silverton, Tex. The two contenders each received the same number of votes and, rather than demand another election, they took the sporting way out.

IN HIS essay about his plans for the future, a sixth grader in a San Diego, Calif., school said he would like to go to the moon. "And after that," he concluded, "I would like to travel."

BACK in 1938, a man working for the highway department near Canton, Okla., bought a meal ticket in a cafe there. He was shifted to another job before the ticket was used up. Recently he revisited the cafe and pulled out the ticket. Not only was it still good, but he was served by the same waitress who had sold it to him 18 years before.

SANTA FE, N. Mex., police have finally gotten a call for help from a merchant there, after his store was burglarized for the 30th time in three years.

AWAKENING the other night, a Dallas, Tex., man found a would-be burglar by his bed. The man gave chase, but the thief got away. A short time later he returned and asked for the green hat and plaid jacket he had left behind. The man gave chase again, but the burglar got away a second time.

SHOWING up at the jail office in Tulsa, Okla., a bootlegger said he was ready to begin serving his sentence. But the officials couldn't hold him; there had been a mixup in the files of the case, and the court order needed to jail him had been lost in the shuffle.

THIEVES who broke into the garage of a cereal salesman in Davenport, Iowa, apparently don't like cereal. All they did was cut open the boxes of oatmeal they found there, and steal the premiums inside the boxes.

ENTERING his beagle in a dog show at Pueblo, Colo., a Denver man had high hopes of winning a title. Now he's suing the show because his hound left in a hurry—in pursuit of a rabbit—and hasn't been seen since.

IN PORT HURON, Mich., a youngster has been making a pitch to various storekeepers about doing odd jobs for a quarter. He usually gets a quarter, even though there's no work for him. Now juvenile authorities would like a chat with the lad about the $15 to $20 a week he is reported to be making on his rounds.

RANCH
FLICKER TALK

by movie editor BOB CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

7TH CAVALRY

Custer's Last Stand is only the beginning of Randy Scott's troubles in Columbia's exciting new movie of soldier-and-Indian warfare

IF YOU want to know what happened *after* Custer's Last Stand, go and see *7th Cavalry,* Randolph Scott's new thriller for Columbia. Though Custer and his troops were wiped out to the last man at Little Big Horn, that wasn't the end of the excitement. Hollywood's version of what came next is the story of a captain, played by Randy, who is accused of having deserted Custer and blamed by the widows of the men killed for not having been with his command.

Actually, the captain had been given special, but verbal, permission to go and fetch his fiancee, Barbara Hale, back to the fort. But he can't prove it, not even to Barbara's father, a colonel who comes to the fort to investigate the disaster.

The colonel bitterly opposes his daughter's marriage to a man he considers a coward. First he tries to get Randy to resign his commission, but fails; then he sends Randy on a suicide mission back to Little Big Horn, now considered sacred land by the Indians, who swear to kill any white man who sets foot on it.

What saves him and his men from massacre is the surprise ending of the picture, and I wouldn't give it away for an Oscar.

I might be giving you a hint, and then again I might be giving you a bum steer, when I tell you that the movie was originally called *The Return of Custer.* Anyhow, the title change had nothing to do with the plot. It was Randy's idea, because he's superstitious about one thing—the number 7. His last movie, by the way, was *Seven Men From Now,* and he prevailed upon the producer, in both cases, to get his lucky number into the title. Actually, it *was* the 7th Cavalry that Custer commanded.

The troupe went to Mexico to make the picture, a long way from Little Big Horn, but with plenty of beautiful and uncivilized country to photograph in Technicolor.

It was Barbara's first trip south of the Border, and she loved it. She discovered she has a passion for Mexican food.

"At first you think the top of your head is going up in flames," she explained, "but then your mouth cools down a bit, and everything tastes marvelous."

Her last purchase before heading home for Hollywood was a Mexican cookbook. When she told her husband, Bill Williams, that she was planning some experiments (featuring red peppers) he threatened to buy an asbestos cover for his tongue.

The star of the show, at least as far as the natives were concerned, was Randy's horse. The Mexican Indians who were hired as extras were not very impressed with the actors, but they were goggle-eyed over Stardust. He's a handsome sorrel with a white face, and he's huge, standing over 17 hands. The Indians' own ponies looked like colts beside him.

The high point while the troupe was on location was an anniversary celebration for Russell Hicks, who plays the crusty colonel in *7th Cavalry*. It was in the spring of 1916 that Russell made his debut, in the D. W. Griffiths production *Intolerance*. The event was duly celebrated with forty candles on a big cake.

Another face which ought to be getting familiar to you Western fans is Michael Pate's. He plays another cavalry captain, and it's his fifth Western part in a year. There's nothing remarkable about that, except that Mike is an Australian, and off the screen he speaks with a typical Australian twang.

He's the only Australian actor, except Errol Flynn, who has been able to make himself over into a Westerner when the part calls for it. Mike worked hard for five years to overcome his accent.

"Even now, though, the pronunciation of some words throws me," he admits. "When one of them crops up in the dialogue, I have to make a deal with the director to substitute another word. If that can't be done, I may have to practice for hours to get it right."

He gets some help when he's practicing from his wife, who is an American and his only diction coach. She gives the word and he repeats it, over and over again.

One time the word was "danger," which Mike pronounces "dineger."

"She'd say it, then I'd say it and not get it right. Finally I got mad, and I kept saying it louder and louder until I was shouting, 'Danger,' 'Danger,' 'DANGER.' The next thing we knew, the neighbors had come to rescue us."

Barbara Hale's love helps Randolph Scott forget his dilemna

J. CARROLL NAISH
Man of Many Lands

THE MOST international star in Hollywood is undoubtedly J. Carroll Naish, both in the kind of parts he plays and also where he plays them.

A minute biography of him reads: "A New York Irishman who made a theatrical career in Paris, performed in Russia, Egypt and India; who trained for the stage with a Yiddish Theater Group; who played a Japanese prince in his first motion picture; whose greatest fame came as an Italian immigrant in *Life With Luigi* on radio and TV."

Carroll has had two ambitions as far back as he can remember—to be an actor and to travel—and he's fulfilled both of them spectacularly well. Acting came first. As a child he played with Gus Edwards's kiddie troupe in vaudeville.

His travels started, as they have for millions of others, as the guest of Uncle Sam. In 1917 he enlisted in the American Flying Service, and saw action on both the French and Italian fronts. He also formed a song-and-dance team with two wartime buddies, and while entertaining troops he was seen by the great French revue star Gaby Deslys.

When the war was over he joined Gaby in *Madame Frou Frou,* which established him as a favorite in Paris and other European cities, and eventually took him on tour to Russia, Egypt and India.

Carroll looked for his next job in New York, and found that the best training to be had for a serious acting career rather than a musical one was with a Yiddish Theater down on the Lower East Side.

After that he went to Hollywood. He registered as an extra, and played in a few crowd scenes before his break came along. That happened when another actor became ill and Carroll got his part, that of a Japanese prince. It was also only the beginning of many of his foreign roles.

Most people flatly refuse to believe that Carroll's ancestry is practically pure Irish, because he has become so completely identified with Latin types. At one point he was afraid he was permanently stuck in South of the Border parts. But then along came the radio role of Luigi, and people decided he must be Italian, not Mexican.

In more than thirty years of acting Carroll has never played an Irishman, but that doesn't keep him from being as Irish as possible off the screen. He has made a specialty of Irish history, and he has a library on the subject that scholars envy.

He also owns a 200-year-old ancestral castle in a place called Bally Cullen, in his parents' homeland. His work keeps him from seeing it very often, but, he says, "It's nice to know it's there to come home to."

Carroll's list of acting honors is long. He has had three Academy Award nominations, two or three acting prizes from Catholic organizations, and a trophy from the Foreign Correspondents Association for the best character acting of 1947. He also won critical raves from the New York critics last year for his performances in two Broadway plays.

Early in his career Carroll married an actress, with whom he has lived quietly and happily ever since. They have one daughter, Elaine, who was recently married.

"I expected Elaine to be stage-struck," said Carroll. "To me it seems natural for a youngster to want to act. At least I thought she'd inherit itching feet and want to see the world. But I guess Elaine thought there had been enough acting and traveling in the Naish family. She just wanted to settle down."

He admits settling down is beginning to appeal to him, too. "But I always say—just one more movie, or play, or TV show. I guess I'll never move into my castle in Ireland."

United Artists

Naish is pure Irish, but he's never played an Irishman in his life

Border Breed

by RAY G. ELLIS

HAMP WALKINSHAW looked across the scarred table at his friend Tom Ralston, and felt sick inside at his own thoughts. A water glass half full of whisky rested on the table before Ralston. His lean face was flushed.

"So I've been spending plenty of money," Ralston remarked, regarding Hamp through bloodshot eyes. "It's my money, isn't it?"

"I don't know, Tom," Hamp said quietly. "I hope it is. We've sashayed over a lot of country together. I never knew you had that much money."

"How much money? I buy a little whisky and you talk as if I'd been spending like a bonanza king." He lifted the glass to his lips and let some of the amber liquid trickle into his mouth.

ONE MAN WAS causing the trouble around Oro Blanco . . . and Hamp was afraid to learn whether it was his brother . . . or his best friend

Ralston was a lean man of twenty-seven, two years older than Hamp. There was no finer rider, whether atop a cow pony or a bronc, and he had shown Hamp much of what he knew. Now his long, strong fingers gripped the glass before him in a white-knuckled grasp, and he tapped the base of the glass against the table, an unconscious gesture.

"When you and Roy inherited your spread and asked me to come work for you, I didn't figure on this," Ralston said, his voice beginning to slur a little from the whisky. "You and I have rubbed each other's fur the wrong way more than once, but this is the first time I've ever been mistaken for a cattle thief."

Hamp, wishing now that he hadn't brought up the subject, said, "I didn't call you that, Tom. I just asked where you got all the money you've been spending."

"If that isn't calling a man a thief, I don't know what is," Ralston remarked in a loud, bitter voice. "With all the rustling that's been going on around here, you suspect your old friend the first thing."

Several heads turned toward the two men at the loud words and Hamp, his back to the long narrow barroom, looked over his shoulder for a moment. The room was smoke filled and there was a loud jumble of voices that rose and fell in irregular waves. At the back were four tables, and at one of these Hamp and Tom Ralston sat.

The long bar was lined with the men of Oro Blanco, whiling away a long evening in the Border Saloon. With the sound of Ralston's angry voice the jumble of noise faded, dying like the last sigh of a wind, and faces turned one by one toward the two men at the back of the room.

Hamp turned back to his friend and said, "Let's get out of here, Tom. This is no place to air our differences."

Ralston, thoroughly angry by this time, shoved half out of his chair and thrust his face toward Hamp's. "Why isn't it the place?" he demanded. "If you want to call me a cattle thief you can do it in public. I'm not proud." When Hamp said nothing, Ralston raised his head and said to the room in general, "We've been pards for two years, and have been in plenty of scrapes together. Now he's calling me a thief." His voice rose. "He's accusing me of stealing his own beef. What can you do with a man like that?"

Hamp let the words pound into his head. He hadn't realized how his questions must have sounded to his friend, until just then. He suddenly understood that the idea of the stolen cattle had been in the back of his mind all along. His face flushed a deep color at his own thoughts, and at the realization that his subconscious meaning had been so obvious.

There was not a sound in answer to Ralston's question to the room. Hamp wished he were somewhere far from there at that moment, but he knew he couldn't leave with all eyes watching what he would do.

He tried to signal Ralston with his head, nodding to get him to sit down, but the man was too angry to see anything. Ralston's glaring eyes roved over the room as if searching for the answer to his question there. Then, drunkenly, he moved into impulsive action.

Hamp wasn't ready for it, and the whisky caught him full in the face when Ralston flipped up the glass. The burning liquid blinded him. Before he could move, Ralston came across the table in a flying leap, an animal-like cry on his lips.

Hamp's chair went over backward with him in it, and Ralston dropped on top of him. He rubbed whisky out of his eyes with one hand and tried to ward off Ralston's attack with the other. He didn't want to fight a friend this way; it was different from the friendly scuffles they had often engaged in before. But he sensed the anger and hate in Ralston, and knew he'd have to fight back or take a bad beating.

In a glance, from his nearly inverted position, Hamp saw the silent ring of faces around the room, expressionless, waiting. Hamp, himself, wasn't free of a suspicion of thievery. Ralston sat up and sent a crashing fist into the side of Hamp's head, but Hamp moved with it. He rolled over and dumped Ralston to the floor beside him.

Ralston was drunk, but not so drunk he had lost the balance and wiriness that made him a great rider. Before Hamp could clamber on top of his friend, Ralston leaped to his feet and danced back a few feet, his face set in the same mirthless grin Hamp had seen on it in so many other fights. But this time

Ralston's wrath was directed at Hamp. The feeling of distaste, even sickness, came back to him as he got to his feet.

RALSTON came in again, moving with catlike grace, flicking lefts and then a right out, probing, looking for an opening. Hamp was larger than Ralston, and heavier. His arms were made of large biceps and heavy forearms and wrists. A blow from one of those arms could break a man's jaw or crush his nose. But Ralston wasn't going to let that happen.

Half-heartedly, Hamp threw a right and left that just grazed Ralston as he moved away. Tom followed up with slashing jabs that caught Hamp on the cheekbone and the side of the head. The flesh split, and Hamp felt warm blood roll down the side of his face.

Ralston began to talk then, as Hamp remembered he always did when he felt victory was in his grasp. He said the words rhythmically as he breathed, following them up with punishing blows, first to the head and then to Hamp's heavy body.

"Thief, huh," Ralston grunted out. He jabbed twice. "If you want trouble you'll get it."

Hamp began to give ground, still unable to put his heart into the fight. But how could you apologize without looking as if you were afraid to fight? The time for apologies had passed at the table.

Ralston opened his mouth to speak again, and Hamp lunged forward. His movement lacked the grace of his adversary, but the sudden movement caught Ralston by surprise. Hamp's heavy fist crashed into Tom's jaw, and the lighter man staggered backward several steps, his mouth suddenly gushing red. He wiped his hand across his bleeding lips and then moved forward again, but some of the spring was gone from his step.

With Hamp's sudden action, the crowd began to take sides, and a sound grew with the increasing fury of the fight. Hamp moved in, meeting Ralston's advance, his heavy arms beginning to move with punishing regularity. But Ralston was not done for yet. He blocked the blows as often as not, and those that he didn't stop he took going away, cushioning their power.

"Remember that time in El Paso?" he said. "You fought better that day."

Ralston's strength returned with his voice, and he was again on the attack. He jabbed with his left and then clouted Hamp with a right that sent him staggering backward. His foot caught in the rungs of the chair he had been sitting in earlier, and he went down on his back. Tom pounced on top with a cry of triumph, beating his fists into Hamp's unprotected face until the room began to whirl before Hamp's bruised eyes.

He tried to struggle free and found no strength. Then he thought, I'm glad he won. I deserved this. It was like waiting for his own execution, as he waited for his senses to leave him. But the rain of blows stopped, and he felt Ralston's weight leaving him. It was a minute before he found that he could move. Then he sat up.

Sheriff Harris Lind stood between him and Ralston, his weathered face set in a scowl. He growled, "Reckon you've had enough, Walkinshaw. Are you going to get out of here and out of Oro Blanco in the next fifteen minutes, or do I have to throw you in jail?"

Hamp got to his feet unsteadily and went toward the front door of the saloon, conscious of the stares he received. He'd been beaten good and proper, and now the spectators were studying his wounds.

He staggered through the front door and stood outside by the rail, letting the night air revive him. But it wouldn't remove the sickness inside him. It was with a heavy heart that he climbed aboard his dun gelding. . . .

That had been two days ago. Tom had come back to the ranch, going about his duties silently and, Hamp thought, a little sheepishly. That was Tom's way. He was quick to forget. For two days Hamp had tried to force himself to go to his friend and apologize, but his stubborn pride held them apart.

Now, with a sickness many times that he had felt in the Border Saloon the night of the fight, he looked at the limp figure that hung across the saddle of the familiar piebald mare. Then he broke into a run, heading for the silent procession, led by a Box W man. The rider reined in when he saw his boss. His usually carefree face was fraught with pain and worry.

LOLITA

HAMP
WALKINSHAW

Hamp stopped beside the rider, unable to look toward Ralston's body for the moment. "Where did it happen?" he asked.

The man shook his head in despair. "I met Rainbow near the fence over at Miss Foster's place. He was bringing him in." His voice faded out. "I—I told him I'd take Tom the rest of the way."

Hamp forced his feet to take him to the side of his friend. Hesitantly he felt the body. It was cold. "What killed him?" he asked.

Then he saw the dark reddish-brown spot on Tom's coat. It was under the arm, close under, almost as if Ralston had thrown up the arm in an attempt to ward off the bullet.

"Who did it?" he demanded, his fury jumping with each pulsing of his heart. "Damn it, somebody murdered him."

"I don't know, Hamp," the cowboy told him. "Rainbow didn't know, either." The man looked to see if his words were getting through to the distraught Walkinshaw, then said, "Rainbow found him up at the edge of the trees, in that small meadow that's spring fed. He said he must have been dead since last night."

"Last night!" Hamp shouted, turning on the hapless man. "Why wasn't I told he didn't come in with the rest?" He moved toward the cowboy, his face dark, demanding.

"I don't know, boss. Lots of times he does not come in. We thought he was in town seeing that Mex—that girl he's so sweet on."

HAMP turned away and the man stopped speaking. It was true, Ralston was pretty much his own boss around the ranch. He came and went as he pleased, although carrying his full share of the load. Hamp and his brother—his half brother, actually—had had hot words over Tom more than once, but Hamp wouldn't let Roy fire the man. Hamp and Tom had been too close for that.

Now Roy came to the back door of the house, his big frame nearly filling the opening. "What's the matter out there?" he called out. "Who's that across the saddle?" When

SHERIFF
HARRIS LIND

TOM RALSTON

JILL FOSTER

Hamp didn't answer, Roy came down the back steps and across the yard toward them. "That's Tom Ralston's horse," he said presently. Then he added, "So he finally got his reward."

Hamp jerked around, facing his brother, his anger blazing. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded. He stood with clenched fists, ready to tear into Roy if he said another word. But the big man walked past him and began to examine the body.

"Clean shot," Roy observed. "It probably got his heart."

Hamp's face darkened and he said, "Is that what you call a clean shot?" He might as well have gotten it in the back." He advanced on Roy, the muscles of his jaw standing out in knots, so hard was he clenching his teeth. "You hated him," he added. The words were a challenge.

Roy's own temper rose then and he faced Hamp squarely. A nerve twitched at one corner of his mouth. "You fought with him and lost. You've been brooding over that for two days."

Hamp came on, his violence held back by only a thread of self-control. Then the rider spoke up, breaking the tension for the moment. "What shall I do with him, Mr. Walkinshaw?" he asked, and both brothers turned toward him.

"Take him on into Oro Blanco," Roy ordered curtly. "Sheriff Lind will want to see the body."

The rider started to move off, but Hamp

stopped him again with his words. "Get him off his horse and into a wagon. Wrap him in a blanket."

When the rider showed distaste for the job, Hamp told him he'd do it himself. Both men watched until the piebald had disappeared around the barn. Then they faced each other and found that their anger had died.

Hamp felt empty inside as they turned toward the house. He knew he was dwelling on the wrong things, but he couldn't help remembering Tom's wide grin and his carefree manner as he'd say, "I'm too mean to die, Hamp. I'll have a long gray beard before they put me away."

Then Roy spoke again and, at the words, Hamp knew he should object, but there was not even that much life left in him. "They say you accused him of stealing cattle from Box W," Roy said, as they mounted the back steps. "The whole town knows it."

What was the use of denying it? Maybe it was true, maybe that was what he had been subconsciously thinking all along. This idea only served to make him feel worse, and he merely grunted in reply to Roy's words.

"Tom was found on Jill Foster's place," Roy went on. "Everybody knows you have an eye on Jill."

Hamp had started in the back door ahead of Roy. At the words, he turned on his brother and looked down at the big man. "Are you trying to say that I killed Tom because of our fight?" he asked harshly.

Roy looked surprised. "I'm merely pointing out the facts, Hamp," he said calmly.

Some time later, Hamp got the wagon, with Tom Ralston in the back, started on its way to town. Then he came back into the house, restless, finding that the emptiness of a short time ago was being replaced with a cold rage at what had been done.

Hamp had never known a man quite like Tom. They had met in Montana more than two years ago, and had traveled together since then, working at the same places, moving on when the spirit hit them. They had helped each other out of a tight more than once, and that had cemented their relationship to the point where Hamp thought nothing could break it.

But then had come the news that Hamp's father had died and left the ranch to him and Roy Walkinshaw, the old man's son by his first marriage. Hamp hardly knew Roy, since they had not seen each other since Hamp was five. When Hamp's mother had left his father, relatives had insisted that they raise the boys, saying the old man wasn't reliable. So Hamp and Roy had been separated, sent to different branches of the family.

The responsibilities of the ranch had brought a change in Hamp, without his even being aware of it. He had tried to go on living the same carefree way, but it was not to be. The ranch tied him down and drew him away from Tom, who had no reason to change. And now Hamp remembered with horror the fight in town and his suspicions about his friend. If that was what the ranch was going to do to him, he wanted no part of it.

He wandered across the living room to a table that stood beside the worn couch. In an oval frame stood a small daguerreotype picture of Roy taken when he was perhaps eleven or twelve years old. Hamp picked it up and studied it.

The picture was growing dark with age, but it revealed a thin, gentle-faced child. Hamp couldn't help but compare the personality the picture revealed, with what Roy had turned out to be. He wondered if he had changed as much.

NOW he had been back home a mere two months, and he and Roy were at odds —had been almost from the first day— and Tom Ralston was dead. Roy was bitter because he had arrived at the ranch nearly three months before Hamp, and had had to put things in shape. He hadn't made much of an effort to hide his feelings when Hamp arrived.

Hamp put the picture back on the table and left the room, heading out the back way. Until that moment he had forgotten about the girl in town who Tom had been seeing. She would have to be told—though she probably would know as soon as the wagon got there.

The dun gelding stepped out briskly. It was still before noon, and the air held a crispness that would be gone in another hour. The trail

twisted about and finally led him in a generally northwest direction, away from the border and toward Oro Blanco.

To his left, toward the border, lay a low range of rugged hills. As he rode he saw, nestled against those hills, the whiteness of the Foster ranch buildings. There was a spring there and trees, lending greenery to the generally brown country.

His thoughts were not of Jill today, but of the Mexican girl in town and of what he would say to her. What could he say, really? "I'm sorry," had a hollow sound to it, when something was beyond repair.

He passed between high boulders, a short time later, and the road began to drop toward town. He kept his mount at the same brisk pace until he came to the outskirts. Here there were low adobe buildings, the dwelling places of the Mexican population. In one of those houses lived Lolita Gonsalves, Tom's girl.

Oro Blanco itself was a town of sun-blanched buildings that hugged one dusty street for a block or so. The town had a tired look about it, as if the weight of bright sunlight was almost too much to bear. The few people on the street moved slowly in the heat.

Hamp rode the street until he was opposite the narrow front of Lind's office. Lind was actually deputy sheriff of Santa Cruz County. The sheriff was in Nogales. When Hamp had tied the gelding at the rail, he swung over the horizontal bar and entered the office.

Lind looked up from his desk and said, "I was just fixing to ride out to your place."

"Has Tom's body arrived?"

Lind nodded curtly. "It's down at Doc's now. The burial will be tomorrow. What do you know about the shooting?"

Hamp told him everything, knowing how little it was. When he had finished, Lind looked up at him squint-eyed, then drew out the makings and began to form a smoke.

"You called Tom a cattle thief, according to what he told me the night you and he fought," Lind said.

Hamp's temper jumped for a moment, and he waited for it to cool. Then he said, "I asked him where he got all the money he was spending. It was none of my business. He had a right to fight."

"I didn't say he didn't," Lind commented, putting the cigarette into his mouth. He reached down and struck a match on the floor. When he had the cigarette going he asked, "Do you still think Tom was a cattle thief?"

"Hell, no," Hamp told him. "I've know him for two years and I know he wasn't that kind."

"Then what made you suspicious of him?"

Hamp clamped his jaw on his next words. He didn't know the answer to that question. He went to the window and looked out onto the street, but jerked around again at Lind's next words.

"It's my guess that the killing had something to do with the rustling that's been going on hereabouts. It seems mighty funny that it started about the time you two came down from the north."

Hamp stomped across the room, his fists clenched at his sides. "You're the law around here. Maybe if you had found out who was behind the rustling, Tom would be alive right now."

Lind puffed on his cigarette, regarding Hamp through the smoke with calculating eyes. "Maybe this was a falling out of thieves. Maybe you know more than you're letting on."

Hamp's temper flew out of bounds and he crouched to spring, knowing nothing except that he intended to batter this man who was calling Tom and him a cattle thief. But he wasn't quick enough. Lind, suspecting that he would overshoot his mark, was ready. He swept a revolver off the top of the desk and swung it around toward Hamp.

"Cool down, Walkinshaw," he ordered in a hard voice. "I was giving you a dose of what you'll get when you go out there in the street." He waved the gun toward the door. "You can't fight the whole town."

Hamp stared down the barrel of the revolver, calculating his chances for a moment longer. Then the twisting emotion inside him began to settle down, and he relaxed.

"All right," he breathed. "What do you want of me?"

Lind shrugged and dropped the gun to the desk top again. "I can't lock you up, although that's what most of Oro Blanco would like. But I *am* warning you to stay out of

trouble. I won't have any fighting, with or without guns. Understand?"

Hamp moved toward the door. When he had his hand on the knob, he said, "Where does this Gonsalves girl live?"

Lind's hard face softened a little as he gave directions. He finished with, "You can't miss it. They have quite an array of gourds and all that hanging on the front porch."

HAMP went outside and swung astride his mount again, conscious of the stares from the street. Normally friendly, the people of Oro Blanco turned away from him when he swung his gaze around, or else looked at him scowling, wanting to say what they thought but not knowing whether they dared.

As he swung about, heading out of town the way he had come, he passed the Border Saloon. Automatically his eyes turned in that direction, as if he might see Tom Ralston there, grinning up at him as of old. It was not Tom but a stranger, a thin, dark man with yellow eyes, who was looking at him. Their eyes met for a moment, and Hamp had the feeling that the man was looking right into him, to see what was there. He wondered inanely if the narrow-faced man liked what he saw.

Hamp left the stranger behind, but the feeling of eyes upon his back remained with him until he left the main road and began to make his way over corn stubble and then sage to the small house that Lind had described. The porch of the adobe structure was as Lind had told him. A colorful array of painted gourds hung from strings. Over the door there was a small wooden cross. Hamp found himself wishing that this unpleasant chore were over with.

Almost as soon as he had dismounted, a woman showed herself in the open doorway of the house. She wore an apron, her fat brown face was set in sad lines, and she looked at Hamp without expression. He went onto the porch and introduced himself.

"You are Tom's friend," she said simply. "Lolita is crying. I tell her it is no good to love the gringo but she—"

Mrs. Gonsalves never got to finish her statement, for a bundle of fury burst past her with a scream of rage. Hamp saw the gleam of metal in the girl's hand just in time, and managed to dodge the downthrust of the knife.

"You killed Tom," Lolita screamed. "You killed him for stealing your cattle." She backed off and then charged again. "He never steal your cattle." The knife plunged downward again. "Malaga," she cried. "Malaga."

Hamp reached for the thin arms, hoping that once she was stopped she would calm down enough to let him talk. But Lolita was quick. She changed direction and slashed at his middle. The blade slit his shirt and left a shallow scratch across his belly.

"Lolita!" Mrs. Gonsalves screamed.

Hamp's hand flashed out and caught the arm that held the knife. He twisted the girl toward him and grabbed her other arm. She struggled for a moment and then gave up, glaring at him, her breath coming in gasps that raised and lowered her white blouse over her breast.

"Tom was my friend," Hamp told her. *"Mi amigo."*

The words in her native tongue had their effect, and her eyes suddenly flowed tears. The knife dropped to the floor of the porch. Her mother bent her heavy body with an effort, and picked it up.

Hamp turned Lolita toward the door and gave her a gentle push. She entered the house, passing her mother, who said softly, *"Mi muchacha. Pobre muchacha."*

There was nothing more to say. Hamp went back to his mount, but before he had reined about he remembered something. Mrs. Gonsalves was still standing in the doorway of the small house.

He asked, "Who is Malaga? Why did she say his name?"

The big woman looked startled. She backed into the darkness of the room, closing the door behind her. Hamp felt as if it were the door of knowledge that was closing. He felt his heart beat faster with the thought that perhaps he had stumbled upon something. For a long moment he hesitated. But he would get nothing out of those people. The name had frightened Mrs. Gonsalves, and only a greater fear would make her talk.

He rode along the road toward Box W, lost

"You have a habit of getting in brawls, it seems," Jill said . . .

in thought. He knew no more now than he had when he rode into town. He turned the name "Malaga" over in his mind, but it meant nothing to him. Perhaps it was just some name the girl had made up. No, there must be some connection somewhere; but how it tied in with Tom Ralston's killing, he didn't know.

The sun was almost directly overhead now, and the heat was growing with each minute. Already the road ahead was wavering before his eyes. But he paid no attention to it, so accustomed to the illusion had he grown in the two months since he had come to Arizona. He looked up at the rock narrows ahead and stiffened in the saddle. There had been movement for a moment high in the rocks.

He was still some distance away, but he could see a light flash off some shiny object. He studied the area—it was above the shimmering heat waves from the road—and saw dark movement, and again the reflection of light. The picture of Tom Ralston lying dead over the saddle of his horse flashed to mind and he swerved off the road to his left.

In a moment he was out of sight of the narrows, hidden by a low hill. He dug his spurs into the dun horse. It responded instantly, stretching out into a run in the space of a few steps. He swung wide and came upon the rocks from behind, breaking into view only a short distance away.

At the foot of the big rock outcropping, hidden from the road, stood a horse. Above, clambering toward the mount, was the dark form of a man. He held a rifle in one hand and was using the other to vault from one boulder to another. At the sound of Hamp's mount, the man looked up and saw that he wouldn't make it to his horse in time to get away. He turned and began to climb back the way he had come.

Hamp came in close and swung out of the saddle, drawing his revolver from its holster at his waist as soon as he hit the ground. This

must be the man who had shot Tom, he felt, and his pulse pounded with the exertion and his excitement.

The rocks were huge reddish-brown boulders of sandstone rising perhaps forty or fifty feet above the surrounding country. Hamp entered the pile and began to climb, keeping a wary eye on the lookout above him. Hamp wanted to take this man alive, if possible, for he was probably the answer to many things.

AFTER several minutes of climbing, he stopped and listened. There was no sound, and he waited, searching the rocks above. Then his attacker moved and Hamp caught a glimpse of him for a moment. He snapped off a shot in the general direction and saw the bullet kick up dust a few feet away. The man disappeared in a hollow and Hamp began to move again.

But the man above was no fool. He found a protected place and waited. Hamp heard the blast of the rifle and felt the sting of rock splinters as the bullet whined off, only inches from his head. He dropped down and waited. When he heard sound above, he lifted his head and caught sight of the bushwhacker coming back toward him. It was the same yellow-eyed man he had seen in front of the Border Saloon earlier that day.

Hamp raised his revolver again, this time aiming for a leg. He triggered the shot and saw it miss by a scant inch. The man began to move away again. Hamp changed his course this time and began to work his way around the rocks at the same elevation, moving as silently as possible. When he judged he was as far behind his attacker as he was going to get, he moved upward again.

The dark-skinned man was crouched in a small hollow, listening for a sound from Hamp. Hamp shoved the pistol into his holster and jumped. The man saw him coming, but not soon enough. The rifle started to come around, but Hamp dropped on top of him and the rifle fired harmlessly into the air.

But his attacker was wiry, for all his thinness. He immediately dropped his hold on the rifle and squirmed away, turning on his back as Hamp started to follow. Hamp, too, was on hands and knees, and he caught the man's bootheel full in the face. It ripped the healing cheek wound that he had received from Tom Ralston.

A cry tore from him as he got to his feet and rushed. He bored through the man's flailing fists and got him in a hug. They staggered to the edge of the rocks, swaying, gasping hoarsely. Then Hamp felt his feet slipping out from under him.

As he fell he loosed his grip. He bounced from a rock and began to slide down a long slope, with the other man just above him, following him down, both of them sliding and rolling helplessly. In the whirling world around him, Hamp caught sight of blue sky and rocks, then the road. It seemed there was a horse there, and then it was gone from sight.

He came to a sudden halt on his back against a rock. His head hit sickeningly into the boulder. The moment before he lost consciousness he saw the yellow-eyed man coming at him.

But it wasn't the same face that looked down at him when he came to his senses. He saw blue eyes framed by deep auburn hair. He felt something cool slide down his throat and he swallowed, then saw that the woman held a canteen to his lips. It was Jill Foster.

"So he killed me and now I'm in heaven," Hamp said, still only half conscious.

"So I scared him off and you're still in Arizona," retorted Jill with a grim smile.

He struggled up to a sitting position and put his hand to his head. There was matted blood at the back, and the beginning of a large lump.

"Much obliged," he muttered, remembering the horse he had seen on the road while falling.

Automatically, he looked above him at the jutting rocks. It was a long, rough fall. He was lucky he had come out with only a bump on the head.

"You have a habit of getting in brawls and getting beaten, it seems," Jill said, and then a silence descended between them as they both realized she had been referring to his fight with Tom. In a quieter tone she added, "I'm sorry about Tom, Hamp."

He nodded and got to his feet, where he stood swaying for a moment until the dizzy spell left him. He looked down at her, her

closeness affecting him. She was of medium height, but she filled out her riding clothes nicely.

Then he said, "Tom was found on your place, Jill. Tell me about it."

"Tell you about what?" she said with a touch of anger. "What do you think I know about it? One of my men found him, that's all."

He looked directly into her eyes. "What was he doing there? He had no business there at all."

She looked away from him, and he had a feeling that he had touched upon something, but what it was he didn't know. He grabbed her shoulders and demanded, "If you know anything at all, Jill, you've got to tell me."

"What could I know?" she cried, and began to twist, trying to get out of his grip. "Let go."

Hamp relaxed his grip reluctantly and she stepped away, thoroughly angry now. Her face was flushed with exertion.

"You called him a thief. Maybe he was trying to get away from that," she said heatedly. "He was a better friend than you'll ever know."

She turned and stalked away, swung into the saddle of her sorrel mare, and rode off, her back ramrod straight.

Hamp watched her until she was out of sight, remembering the concern on her face when he had first regained his senses and remembering, too, the venom in her last words. As he walked back to where his horse stood, one question kept bothering him. Why had his mention that Tom was on her place raised such anger in her?

HE MOUNTED and headed on toward the ranch, but before he had ridden far he swung off the road and headed straight across country toward the far end of Jill Foster's range, where Tom had been found.

He rode upward on an alluvial fan that spread from the hills and then entered the fastnesses of the rough country. As he went higher, there was more greenery on the slopes and the air grew cooler. Then he dropped into a tiny meadow. It was green here, with a scattering of trees. This meadow was spring fed, he had learned on his only other visit here, some time before. It was an oasis in the nearly waterless hills.

Jill had a scattering of cattle on the grass. Hamp headed across toward the trees on the far side, but his hope of finding any clues sank when he saw the bog-like condition of the ground under the trees. Whoever had done the shooting had made sure he left no sign, for he had driven the cattle of the meadow back and forth across the place until there was nothing left but ankle-deep mud.

Still, Hamp searched, hoping that something might have been missed. It was some time later, and after a fruitless search, that he heard the sound of the horse. Instinctively he sought cover, peering through undergrowth until he recognized Jill Foster's rider, Rainbow.

The lanky cowpoke drew in at the edge of the trees and nodded at Hamp, who had now come into the open. He wore a sweat-stained hat, the brim of which shaded his guileless face from the fierce rays of the sun.

"I saw you from across the way," he said in his deep Texan accent. He studied the ground. "It doesn't look as if you'll find much here."

Hamp shook his head, and asked about Rainbow's finding the body. The young rider told him that he had come over to haze some cattle out of brush and had found Tom lying under the trees, his mount nearby.

"It was a mighty close call for Miss Foster, too," Rainbow finished.

Hamp's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?" he asked quickly.

Rainbow shrugged. "When I told her about it, she turned all white and said she'd been there that same afternoon."

"Was she here alone, or with somebody?" Hamp's voice was tight with urgent excitement.

"Well, she—" Rainbow stopped, and Hamp watched helplessly as the rider's face took a stubborn set. Rainbow sensed that he was being pumped for information about his boss, and he didn't like it. "I don't know anything about it," he said quickly. "You'll have to ask Miss Foster."

Rainbow steered his horse past Hamp and set off across the meadow. Doors were being

opened and then slammed in his face, Hamp thought, as he watched the rider's retreating form. He thought of the yellow-eyed man, Mrs. Gonsalves, and the man called Malaga.

He forked the dun gelding and rode from the meadow, feeling frustrated at something that seemed close and yet was still far away. Somebody apparently wanted Tom and him out of the way. It occurred to him that perhaps Tom had heard something about the rustling in the area. That had made him dangerous to the thieves, and so he had been killed. But what about himself? Why had they sent a man to kill him, too? He was as much in the dark about the rustling as anybody else. If he was in danger, then everybody else on the range was in danger too . . .

Hamp looked at the daguerreotype of Roy again, stooping to study it, feeling a jog of his memory. He straightened, pursing his lips. Of course he would remember the picture; there was nothing strange about that. He had been five years old when he left the house, and that wasn't too young to remember. Then why did a partly-remembered idea nag at him? He began to wonder if there weren't something else that he should remember.

Roy came into the room, his heavy features pulled down in a frown. He saw Hamp and immediately started to talk business. "I think we ought to sell out most of this scrub stock," he said, "and start up-breeding next year. We'll never make any money with what we have here."

It was two days after the funeral, and Hamp knew it was time he got his mind off the killing and back on the business of the ranch. It was Sheriff Lind's job to track down outlaws. He had no right to take any more time off brooding about it, letting Roy carry the load.

In a few minutes they were plunged into the discussion of buying and selling, and Hamp had to admit that his brother possessed a crafty head for business. Roy was almost pleasant when lost in the intricacies of the ranch, and Hamp found himself wondering what made his brother so changable.

They had talked for nearly an hour when they were interrupted by the sound of riders. From the thundering noise of it, Hamp judged there was quite a bunch. Rising from the desk where he and Roy had been sitting, he went to the window in time to see eight or ten men sweep past the front and head toward the back.

"Who's that?" Roy asked, the scowl returned to his face.

"Sheriff Lind and some men." Hamp turned from the window and started across the room. "He has Bill Ott and several other ranchers with him."

They were standing in a restless group when Hamp reached the back door. Lind stood away from the rest a little, holding a tight rein on his powerful-looking gray gelding. When Hamp appeared, the sheriff swung out of the saddle and came to the back stairs.

"Step down here, Walkinshaw," he said flatly.

Hamp took one look at the hard-faced ranchers who were backing the sheriff, and did as he was told.

"Shuck the gunbelt."

IT DROPPED with a hollow sound on the bottom step. He felt suddenly naked, The deputy sheriff turned to one of the men in the posse. "Get his horse and saddle it up, Jim, and make it quick. The sooner this is over with, the better I'm going to like it."

Hamp reached out to touch Lind's arm, and saw the stiffening of the men backing him. He dropped his hand to his side again and asked, "What's this all about, Lind? You have to have a reason to arrest a man."

Lind jerked about, and his words came fast and crisp. "We have reasons—about a hundred and fifty of them—up in the hills behind your place."

Hamp stared blankly at him as Lind went on. "There are cattle up there with just about every brand in the county on them. There's just one way to get to where they're hidden, and that's over your land. You were seen in those hills three or four days ago. Do I have to go on?"

Lind's flood of words had their effect on the rest of the men. Hamp felt their eyes on him, eyes that held nothing but contempt. He was the stranger in their midst, someone they had reserved judgment upon until he had proved himself. Now they had made up their minds,

and there would be no changing them unless the real thief was found. And how was that to be managed when they had decided they already had the rustler in their hands?

"Here's his horse, Sheriff," Bill Ott said. "Let's get a move on. Jail's too good for him, to my way of thinking."

Several others chimed in, assenting, and Lind turned toward them for a moment. "He's a prisoner of the law, and don't you forget it. Any man that tries to take things into his own hands will have me to contend with."

He was looking right at Bill Ott when he spoke. The rancher subsided into sullen silence. Hamp felt as if a giant hand were squeezing in upon him. He pictured the cell in Oro Blanco, and himself in it, perhaps for months, while waiting for a trial. Even on the run he would have more of a chance of finding the real thieves than he would sitting in a cell.

"I'll have to have some things from the house," he said to Lind. "My razor and some clean clothes."

Lind looked doubtful for a moment, then started to nod. Hamp knew the sheriff wouldn't let him go alone, but at least there wouldn't be ten men with their guns on him in the house. If there were to be a chance, that would be it.

Then his hopes for escape were blasted when Roy said from the back door, "I'll get those things, Sheriff."

Hamp twisted around in time to see his brother step back inside the house, his face expressionless, perhaps a little pale. Was Roy so stupid he couldn't see what he, Hamp, had been intending? But then, this news must have hit Roy almost as hard as it had hit him. His big brother probably wasn't thinking very clearly.

When Roy brought the things outside and they were stowed in Lind's saddlebags, Hamp followed orders and mounted his dun gelding.

They rode at a brisk pace toward Oro Blanco, Hamp surrounded by the silent, grim men. Jail was too good for him, they had said. Hamp thought of this and looked about him.

Ott was at his left. At Hamp's movement Ott turned toward him, alert for anything. Hamp knew that he wouldn't get far if he tried to make a break for it. The land sloped gently upward as they neared the narrow pass through the rocks, before the long slope toward town. It wasn't hot, but Hamp's shirt clung to his back wetly as he rode. He forced himself to relax a bit.

They were nearly into the pass when the shot came. It split the air, the sound of it slamming down upon them and then bouncing around the rocks. Hamp felt the white-hot lance of the bullet as it ripped across his thigh.

Before anybody knew what was happening, the rifle crashed again, and Hamp felt the wind of the bullet's passing. The posse scattered, and Hamp guessed later that they must have thought they were being attacked by rustlers. But Hamp himself looked upward and saw the thin outline of the yellow-eyed man against the rocks. He had come back to finish his job.

Then there was little time for speculation, for he was suddenly in the open, the posse having left him in the middle of the road as they scattered. The yellow-eyed man disappeared from the lip of the overhanging rocks as the posse opened up on him. Hamp put spurs to his mount and set off down the road before the surprised posse knew what was happening. As soon as he was through the narrow pass, he turned off the road—and just in time. Bullets began to whine off the rocks nearby.

The yellow-eyed man wasted no time in descending from his perch in the rocks. By the time Hamp arrived at the place where he had left his horse, the bushwhacker was mounted and riding, already some distance ahead.

It was rough terrain that they entered, and the ground was hard, so that their horses left little sign. Hamp took out after the man, determined to catch him this time.

The dun gelding was fast, but the man ahead held his distance. They entered a winding draw. A quick glance behind told Hamp that the posse was too far behind to follow them without having to search for their trail. Hamp pushed the gelding as hard as he dared on the hard, treacherous ground.

HE WAS watching the floor of the ravine, and so didn't see in time that the man had dismounted and was waiting for him when he rounded a bend. He saw the smoke from the muzzle of the rifle, and felt

his mount lose stride. But the gelding, though hit, kept moving forward, driving hard until it had no more bottom left. By that time they were almost upon the rifleman. When Hamp felt the horse going down he vaulted from the saddle and dropped on yellow-eyes.

The force of his falling knocked the man to his back. Hamp scrambled astride him and pounded heavy fists to his face. Yellow-eyes had no stamina, and his eyes rolled after the second blow.

"Who are you?" Hamp demanded.

When the man said nothing, Hamp repeated the question, this time grabbing him by the throat. "Orsie Gettel," the man managed to gasp out.

The name meant nothing to Hamp. He asked, "Who sent you to kill me?"

When again Gettel didn't answer, Hamp slapped him with an open palm, his haste to get his information and get away almost turning to panic.

Gettel gasped, "A Mex—Malaga." Hamp tightened his grip on his throat. "In Sonora, San Dominguez. He paid a hundred dollars."

"You killed Tom Ralston."

But Gettel turned white and shook his head violently. "No. I swear I didn't."

"Who, then?"

"I don't know." The voice became frantic. I was just after you. Malaga paid me."

Far down the ravine Hamp heard the clatter of horses. He shoved upward, taking Gettel's rifle with him. "You must be hard up if you'll kill a man for a hundred dollars."

Gettel lay on his back, his dark face a sickly yellowish color. Hamp realized suddenly that Gettel thought he was going to be killed.

"I'm taking your horse," Hamp told him. "If I were you I'd be making tracks out of here."

Gettel got to his feet and wobbled off into the rocks. Hamp, hearing the posse closer behind him, climbed aboard Gettel's mount and set off up the ravine. His leg was throbbing painfully, but apparently most of the bleeding had already stopped.

He reached the top and heard the sound of shots below him. Riding around the rim over the ravine, he hazarded a glance below and saw Gettel surrounded by the posse, his hands high in the air.

Lind would get nothing out of the man, Hamp guessed. Gettel was the kind who would talk only at gunpoint, and Sheriff Lind wasn't the kind of a lawman to use that method. He'd hold Gettel for a while and then let him go. There would be no chance of conviction when all Gettel had attempted was to kill a man they all wanted to see dead anyway.

Hamp rode north for some distance, always keeping to the low country, winding his way up ravines, riding into the open only when the chance seemed worth the distance it saved.

By mid-afternoon he began a large circle toward the south, riding in a westerly direction. Now that he knew where Malaga lived, he intended to find the man and wring the truth out of him. He had a feeling that the Mexican knew much, perhaps everything, about what was going on.

By evening Hamp was headed due south and some ten miles from the border. He traveled until there was no more light. It was the time of the new moon, and the night was too dark for safe travel in that rough country. He found that Gettel's horse carried some provisions and, although he didn't dare risk a fire, he chewed on jerky and assuaged his thirst from the canteen. Then he lay down and was soon fast asleep.

When he awoke, at the first light of dawn, he found he was some miles southwest of the ranch. He didn't know if he was in Mexico yet, for this was unfamiliar country. San Dominguez was almost due south of the ranch, and he knew he'd have to cut back that way if he were ever to find the tiny Mexican village.

It was a long, hot ride. He cut in south behind the hills that were the boundary of Box W. Now he was in familiar country again, for he had ridden this far once in search of strayed or stolen cattle. Once again he set his course south. The country grew more precipitous with each mile.

In the late afternoon he entered a canyon, and got the feeling that he was being watched although, when he searched the steep sides, he saw nothing. It's imagination, he thought. He just wasn't used to being on the dodge.

He reached San Dominguez at dusk. The canyon opened out, funnel-like, and the village lay as if spewed from the mouth of the hills.

Houses clung haphazardly around a small church. They were all of adobe.

Before he had entered the town, two riders swooped on him from either side of the canyon. He realized that the feeling of being watched hadn't been imagination after all. He wondered if he had saved his life riding in on Gettel's horse instead of his own. The heights from which he must have been watched would have enabled the watchers to recognize only the horse, not its rider.

The riders were both Mexican. They drew in beside him, studying him for a moment, then rode alongside silently. By the time they had reached the center of the tiny village they had picked up an entourage of children and curious adults. They were silent, perhaps even hostile; Hamp wasn't sure which, for their faces were expressionless.

"Donde ésta Malaga?" Hamp asked, his voice carrying along the street.

AT THE name, there was a buzz of quiet voices. Then the street became silent again, except for the clop-clop of their horses. His two captors, cartridge belts slung across their shoulders, guided him past the church and down a narrow street. He looked back once and saw the crowd still following silently.

They came to a halt and dismounted before a house that was slightly larger than the rest. One of the men said, "Malaga," and nodded toward the front door.

Hamp grinned at him and had barely gotten out a word of thanks, when the other man took his arm roughly and began to shove him toward the door. Hamp, under tension for two days, jerked his arm free and turned on the man, giving him a shove with the palm of his hand.

Then there was a painful jab in the small of his back and a voice, heavily accented, said, "Do not move, senor."

That the man would shoot, Hamp had no doubt. Why not? There could be no investigation, much less a conviction for murder, in this town. What was a wandering gringo doing in San Dominguez anyway?

The first rider came up, grabbed his arm, and again shoved him toward the door. The other one knocked, waited a moment, then pushed the door open. Hamp was ushered into a beamed, low-ceilinged room. It was furnished with heavy dark furniture. A bright-colored rug covered the floor. Candles provided the only light, sending flickering shadows about the room as the air from the open door touched them.

At one end of the room, behind a desk, was a large man—just how large Hamp didn't realize until he came close. Malaga was short, but he was very fat. It seemed that the fat must be squeezing its way through the pores of his fleshy face, so shiny was it.

He watched Hamp approach across the room, a thin smile touching his lips. He nodded at the two men, who retreated from the room, leaving Hamp alone with him.

"Who are you?" Malaga asked, taking a cigar from a box on his desk. He lit it, watching Hamp all the while.

"You're Malaga," Hamp said. When the Mexican nodded, he said, "I'm Hamp Walkinshaw."

Malaga looked surprised for a moment. Then his face became devoid of expression once again, except for the thin smile. "I thought—"

"You thought I'd be dead," Hamp finished for him, his voice rising. "You sent a fool by the name of Orsie Gettel to kill me. Do you know where he is now? He's in jail in Oro Blanco."

Malaga scowled and thought this over. When he had made up his mind about something, he picked up a small bell from his desk and rang it. Immediately, one of the men outside made an appearance, and Malaga told him something in Spanish, speaking so rapidly that Hamp could not catch a word of it. The guard disappeared again and Malaga turned back to Hamp, his face once again set in a thin smile.

"And so now you come here to accuse me of killing your friend, Tom Ralston. Is this not true, Senor Walkinshaw?"

Malaga's words flowed in a soft, sibilant stream. Hamp found himself hating this mound of flesh. At the mention of Tom's name he sucked in his breath.

"So you did have him killed," he said in a low voice. "I should have known Gettel was lying."

Malaga waved a fat hand. "But no, senor. I know nothing of his death, only what I hear."

Hamp leaned over the desk, resting his hands on it. His words came harshly. "Just what did you hear, Malaga? How come you know so much about Oro Blanco?"

Malaga looked into Hamp's angry eyes and smiled. "That is my business, Senor Walkinshaw. I have ways."

"What is your business? What do you want from us?"

Malaga smiled but said nothing. Hamp's anger grew. He was conscious of it, knowing it would shove him into action. He waited, feeling it grow.

Malaga, too, saw the anger rising in Hamp, and he eyed the bell on the desk. The smile dropped from his oily features and was replaced by a worried frown. His right arm, which lay on the desk top, began to move toward the bell. Hamp waited until his fingers were only inches away from it, then brought his fist down in a heavy blow on Malaga's forearm. Before the Mexican could cry out, Hamp came across the desk, bowling him over in his chair.

They hit the floor with a crash, and the chair splintered. Hamp knew he didn't have much time. He dropped on top of Malaga.

"Who killed Tom Ralston?" he demanded.

Malaga rolled his head on the floor. "I don't know, senor."

Hamp's patience was at an end. He brought his right hand across in an open-handed slap that raised welts on Malaga's face. Again he asked, and again Malaga pleaded ignorance.

A feeling of helplessness came over Hamp as he began to wonder if Malaga might be telling the truth. Perhaps he really didn't know. But there were more questions to be answered.

"What do you want with us?" he demanded. "Why did you send Gettel to kill me?"

MALAGA stared at him through frightened eyes, and no sound came from his mouth. At that moment he was too scared to speak. Hamp raised his fist, and Malaga cried out. At the sound, the door to the room burst open and two men came inside. Hamp scrambled up hastily.

The men carried rifles and held them across their chests at port arms, ready to use the butts or the muzzles, whichever opportunity presented itself. Hamp waited behind the desk in a crouch. Malaga tried to get up, but Hamp shoved him back down again. When the guards were close he twisted to his left and came in low at the one in that direction.

The man swung the butt of the gun, but Hamp was ready. He dodged the blow and swung a savage right into the man's unprotected midsection. His fist went deep and the guard grunted, bending in the middle. Hamp threw another blow at the man's chin and he went down heavily on his back, the rifle clattering free of his grasp.

Hamp reached for the rifle, knowing that he must have a weapon but knowing, too, that to fire his revolver would bring other help to Malaga. The rifle he could use as a club.

By the time he had the weapon in his hands, the other guard was upon him and Malaga was ringing the bell furiously for reinforcements. Hamp had only time enough to shove the butt of the rifle into the advancing man's belly. He gave a cry of pain and his dark face turned pale as he gasped for breath that he couldn't find. His eyes popped and he sank to the floor.

But it was a hollow victory, for five men came into the room, on the run, in answer to the bell. Malaga, his composure regained, turned to Hamp and said, "Put down the rifle, senor. You haven't a chance."

Hamp threw down the rifle in anger. "What are you, Malaga?" he said. "The ruler of this town?"

Malaga smiled and rubbed the welt marks on his cheek. "Much more than that, Senor Walkinshaw. The border is mine from Nogales to Sasabe. I am surprised that you have not heard of me before."

"I never had any business on the border before," Hamp told him. "What happens now?"

Malaga shrugged and looked down ruefully at his splintered chair, then seated himself on the edge of his desk. "I have a very efficient firing squad, but—"

One of the men interrupted with a rapid flow of Spanish. Malaga nodded and turned

back to Hamp. "I will throw you to the people, senor. If you escape alive—" He shrugged, then added, "The people of San Dominguez have heard that you came about the cattle. They are waiting." He shook his head. "They do not like gringos who take the meat from their plates."

Three men came forward, two of them taking Hamp's arms while the third removed the revolver from his holster. They went to the front door of the house, with Malaga following close behind.

Hamp said over his shoulder, "You're stealing the cattle from us."

"But no. I merely buy the cattle. Is this so bad? I buy them at one quarter their worth and sell them to the people of my town at a price they can afford. It gives me a good living, and they have plenty to eat. They do not like gringos who would stop all this."

The street outside was dark, but not so dark that Hamp couldn't see the inhabitants of the town lining it. He guessed that they must have been waiting for this since he had arrived. He would have to "run the gantlet," as they called it farther north.

The men released their hold on him. Malaga said, "Go on, senor. Perhaps you will be lucky."

Hamp inhaled deeply and hesitated a moment. Then he sprinted forward, down the line of men and women. It started well enough; he passed the first few people without a blow being landed. They held boards and branches, but some used only their fists.

Then he saw the clubs rising before him, and felt their pounding on his back. He stumbled and fell and was almost beaten unconscious before he could crawl to his feet.

"Gringo!" they shouted at him. One hysterical woman screamed, "You take the food from our children."

Then the sounds began to fade away and all he saw was the shadowy street. His legs kept moving, though they felt like rubber. He was numb to the blows, yet his body was full of fire, a pain so great that he could not localize it.

Then, somehow, he was clear of the howling mob. A dark alley off to his left promised sanctuary and he stumbled into it, still hearing the crowd behind him.

The alley was black and he tripped over a box. He fell on his face, but shoved upward again and continued on his way. The alley opened into a vacant lot and Hamp staggered on, knowing that he could not go much farther and yet knowing that he had to get away. Malaga would never allow him to leave alive—that much was clear even to his befogged brain.

Across the lot, something moved. Hamp looked dumbly at it, trying to make out what it was. Gradually it took shape, and he saw that it was a horse, standing ground-hitched. He went to it and climbed into the saddle by sheer force of will, for there was no strength left in his legs. He gave the startled mount a kick in the ribs, as the alley erupted shouting men and women. The horse took off in a dead run. Hamp could stand the pain no longer. He passed out.

DAYS later his memory of that journey from San Dominguez to the hills behind Box W slowly came back to him, but when he first regained his senses he was lying on the ground near a tiny stream of water, not knowing how he got there, only knowing that he was alive.

He heard a sound and then realized it was his own groaning. He rolled over and attempted to sit up, only to find that excruciating pain shot through him with every movement. But it was necessary to get up, and he worked at it slowly until he was sitting.

The sun warmed him and he sat there for some time, remembering the events of the night before. Or *was* it the night before? He wasn't sure. Sound drew his attention, and he looked up to see the horse grazing nearby.

When he got to his feet, some time later, he recognized the country. He was above the small meadow that had contained the stolen cattle, a meadow that Box W never used because it was too tortuous a drive for cattle and was too far from the home ranch. He climbed into the saddle and moved off.

After a long time, the narrow wash opened into a meadow, empty of cattle now. A narrow, wavering strip of green showed where the tiny trickle of water made its way over the nearly flat ground. Hamp headed across, determined to reach the ranch.

It was a chore to hold his head up, so he studied the ground passing beneath him as the horse plodded slowly on. He was nearly to the center of the meadow when he saw the hoof print in a small patch of grassless land. He was almost past before his tired brain told him that there had been something unusual about the print. He slid out of the saddle and dropped to his knees. The horse immediately stopped to crop at the grass along the tiny stream.

The print showed a horseshoe that was nicked. When he studied it more closely, he saw that there was a crack across it. Somebody had had to get a new shoe put on his horse. For a long time he remained looking at the imprint. It could mean nothing, he realized; it might have been a print left by the mount of one of the men who had driven the cattle back out of the meadow. But he didn't think so.

The way that the dirt had dried around it, and had even crumbled in several places, showed that it had been there for several days —and the stolen cattle couldn't have been driven away any sooner than the day before.

He climbed astride the horse again and continued toward the ranch headquarters. He wanted to talk to Roy, for now he felt that he could clear himself of the rustling charges. He'd need Roy's help, because he couldn't go into town alone. Lind would throw him in jail without listening to his story.

But Roy wasn't at the ranch. It was deserted, the small crew either out on the range or in town. Hamp limped into the kitchen and set to eating the remains of the roast he found there. It was painful to chew and swallow, but he kept at it until the hunger within him was satisfied.

He wandered into the living room, undecided as to his next move. The picture of Roy caught his attention. He went to the couch and sat down, taking the picture in his hands. He studied it, and suddenly was reminded of the question that had been bothering him.

He remembered how fascinated he had been with that picture as a child. Now he remembered, too, that the picture had been sent with Roy to the aunt he had lived with. Why would Roy bring the picture of himself back to the ranch? Wouldn't his aunt want to keep it? After all, she had raised Roy as her own son.

Hamp turned the frame over in his hands, still not knowing where his thoughts were leading. He was still sick inside from the terrible beating he had taken, and it was a chore even to think.

Still fingering the picture, he looked off across the room. There were too many questions to be answered; it was beyond him. Finally he got to his feet, putting the wooden-framed picture down on the table. As he bent to do that, pain shot through him, and he dropped the frame. It splintered across the top and bottom and a crack appeared across the glass.

He lifted it to look at it again and the whole thing fell apart, the picture dropping face down on the table. Something was scribbled across the back in feminine handwriting. He bent to read it.

Sudden excitement sent his heart throbbing. He picked up the picture and shoved it into his pocket.

He went to his bedroom and got a revolver. The pain in his body momentarily forgotten, he left the house by the back door. As he saddled up, the forty-pound saddle felt as if it weighed a hundred and fifty pounds. But he managed to get the job done, and climbed aboard the sorrel.

There had to be a mistake, he thought as he rode from the yard. Maybe it had been somebody's idea of a joke. But that didn't make sense either.

He was puzzling over it when he passed the rocks and dropped toward town. But he skirted wide and came in at right angles to the main street.

There was only a scattering of houses here, and he rode with lowered head and his hat pulled down.

An alley ran the length of the street behind the places of business. Hamp entered this and rode past stacks of boxes and other trash until he came to the blacksmith's shop. Here, in the vacant lot behind the alley, was a stack of old horseshoes, the smith's dump.

He dismounted and began to search the top of the pile. It was a long chance that he would find the shoe he was looking for, but it was something that had to be done.

FOR nearly an hour he looked, and was about to give it up when he found the shoe. It had rolled to one side and was partly hidden by weeds. When he picked it up and studied it closely, he was certain that it was the right one. The nick was the same shape, and the small crack was there, too.

He went to the back door of the blacksmith shop and pulled it open. Hot air hit him in the face. The smith looked up from his forge, surprise showing on his face when he recognized Hamp. He was a man about Hamp's size, except that his forearms were huge, the muscles standing out in ridges from years of handling the hammer.

"What do you want?" he asked.

Hamp held out the shoe. "This was in your dump. I have to know whose horse you took it from."

The blacksmith moved closer, and Hamp backed to the door. "Stop there," he said. The smith did as he was told. Hamp tossed the shoe to him.

The man studied the shoe squint-eyed. When he looked up there was a peculiar expression on his face. "I took that off your brother Roy's horse a couple of days ago. What do you want it for?"

"You sure it was Roy?" Hamp asked, almost certain now that what he had learned at the house was true.

"Sure I'm sure. Don't you think I'd remember a shoe like this? There must have been a flaw in the metal or it wouldn't have cracked like this. What's the matter with you, anyway?"

Hamp said, "Roy isn't at the ranch. Have you seen him today?"

The blacksmith shook his head.

There was nothing more to be learned here, so Hamp left. In the alley again, he swung into the saddle and headed out of town the way he had come, then swung back toward the road to the ranch. His thoughts were in a turmoil. His discovery had stunned him at first, but now anger was starting to take hold.

A rider went up the road ahead of him. He was about to rein around and wait until the rider was out of sight, when he recognized Jill Foster. Putting the spurs to his mount, he soon caught up with her. Her eyes widened in surprise when he rode up beside her.

"What happened to you?" she cried, seeing the marks of his beating.

He studied her for a moment. She was the first clean and decent thing he had seen in days, it seemed. Her auburn hair glowed in the sun, and her eyes looked even bluer than he remembered them. Hold on, he told himself. He remembered that she had been with Tom only a short time before he was killed, and suddenly his delight in looking at her faded.

"Did you happen to see Roy in town?" he asked in a curt voice.

She nodded. "He was in Shaw's Emporium, buying some things."

He reined around, but she stopped him with a question. "What is it, Hamp? Has something happened?"

He looked at her for a moment before he said, "Roy's not my brother. The real Roy Walkinshaw died two years ago."

"What!" she cried. "That can't be true. You don't know what you're talking about."

"I have proof. I'm almost sure Roy killed Tom, too," Hamp said. "Roy—or whatever his name is—is stealing cattle. He won't get away with it any longer."

Jill shook her head in confusion. "If you have proof take it to the sheriff. It's not your right to punish Roy."

He touched spurs to his horse, saying, "I'll make it my right." He left her looking after him, her mouth still open to speak.

Roy was standing before the emporium when Hamp rode into Oro Blanco. He was talking with several men of the town, towering over them, leading the conversation. When Hamp turned in at the rail, the four men stared at him. Then one of them detached himself from the group and hurried down the street. Hamp watched the man go and then turned his eyes back to Roy.

"So you've come to give yourself up," Roy said. "That was a damn fool stunt, running out on the posse like that. What did you hope to gain by it?"

"I've gained a lot, Roy," Hamp told him. "Except that your name isn't Roy. I found that out."

Roy glanced at one of the men beside him. He said, "He's loco. He's taken too many beatings."

The other two men looked scared, but they were fascinated, too, and stood their ground silently.

"You're not my brother," Hamp blurted out. From the corner of his eyes he saw movement on the walk, but he kept talking. "The real Roy Walkinshaw died two years ago. My guess is that you were working for Roy's aunt when he died. You heard about his inheritance and came here. Maybe the old woman died, maybe a lot of things; but there is one thing I'm sure of, and that is that you're not my half brother."

Roy listened silently till Hamp was finished. Then he threw back his head and laughed, a loud braying sound. "What is this, a scheme to get the ranch all for yourself? That's what you wanted when you came here, you and Tom Ralston. But you fought over it, probably because you found out he was stealing from you, and you shot him."

Sheriff Lind shoved between Hamp and Roy, a pistol in his hand. He said, "I gave you credit for having more sense than to come into town like this, Walkinshaw. You're still under arrest. Come along with me."

At the commotion, the walk began to fill up with bystanders. Lind took Hamp's arm and shoved him none too gently down the walk before him. Hamp protested futilely, saying, "I have proof that Roy is not my brother."

Again Roy Walkinshaw laughed aloud. This time the whole crowd joined in. Hamp clamped his teeth on his words and walked stiffly toward the jail, aware that he had made a fool of himself. Somebody rode past on a horse, and he looked up. It was Jill Foster.

ORSIE GETTEL scowled at Hamp when they entered Lind's office. The bushwhacker had his face pressed against the bars of his cell. He made an insulting remark to Hamp, which the latter ignored.

Hamp faced Lind. "I have proof of what I say." From his pocket he produced the daguerrotype and handed it to the sheriff. "Read the writing on the back."

Lind took the picture, turned it over, and read the few words. "Roy died two years ago," he muttered. "That is, if this thing isn't faked."

"I tell you it's true," Hamp insisted. "I remember the picture from when I was a kid."

The door to the street opened, interrupting him. Jill entered the room. Her eyes came to rest on the picture in the sheriff's hand, and he gave it to her. When she had read the writing on the back, she turned to Hamp, her face distraught.

"Tom told me he suspected Roy," she said haltingly.

Hamp grabbed her by the shoulders. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

She winced under the tightness of his grip. "I couldn't believe that one brother would steal from another. Then, outside of town, you ran out before I could say anything about it. That's why I came back."

"But how did Tom ever find out?"

"That Mexican girl, Lolita, let slip that somebody close to Tom was stealing from Box W. He suspected Roy right off, maybe because they didn't get along."

"That fits in," Lind said. "Since he wasn't your brother, he knew he'd be found out sooner or later, and had to make the most of his opportunity while he was here. The odds are that he's the one who killed Ralston."

"Am I free to go, Sheriff?" Hamp asked.

"You can't take the law into your own hands," Lind objected. "We don't even know if Roy was rustling or not. Still, I don't see how I can hold you here."

"You're damn right you can't hold me." Hamp went to the door and had his hand on the knob when Jill spoke again.

"Hamp, wait." He turned. "Let Sheriff Lind take care of Roy. Please."

He jerked open the door and left the office without replying. He was tired of this whole thing. There had been so much lying, cheating and fighting that he had the urge to chuck everything and ride out right then. But Tom was dead, murdered, and he couldn't let that pass.

It was almost like a stage play when Hamp stepped out. It seemed that the whole town stopped moving as if on cue, and all eyes turned in his direction. He started down the street, searching for Roy, passing staring faces without seeing them. A silence descended over the town and gradually the street became empty, almost as if the people had just melted away.

Still Hamp moved down the street. He saw a horse with a large Box W on its flank, and his eyes stopped there for a moment. It was tied in front of the Border Saloon. Somebody came to the door and looked up the street toward Hamp. His eyes widened and he disappeared inside again. Hamp reached the saloon and shoved open the batwings, his right hand close to the revolver at his hip.

Roy was not at the bar. Hamp said hollowly, "Where is he?"

Nobody spoke for a moment. Then the bartender said inanely, "Who?"

Hamp didn't bother to answer, but moved down the long room toward the back. It made no difference any more what these people thought of him, whether they believed in him or not. He would soon be leaving this town, one way or another.

He went on toward the back, quickening his pace now. Roy couldn't have had much of a start on him. But the alleyway was empty when he reached it, and only a mute pile of boxes greeted him.

The dirt was soft, though, and he found one footstep leading off to the left. He headed in that direction. Sun streamed down on him as he strode along the alley. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. His eyes flicked over the narrow driveway, searching for some sign. Something warned him and he drew in beside a stack of boxes. Just ahead of him was the back door to the jail. Suddenly he remembered something, and began to run toward the door of the jail.

He was too late. Lind was just coming to his senses when Hamp burst into the room. A glance told him that Orsie Gettel had been removed from his cell. Jill Foster was not to be seen. Lind sat up as Hamp leaned over him, shaking his shoulder.

"Did Roy take Jill with him?" Hamp asked anxiously.

Lind said, "He took her and Gettel. Jill accused him of killing Tom Ralston and he admitted it, then took her with him." Lind struggled to his feet. "He stole a rifle and shotgun before he knocked me out."

Hamp ran across the room and out the front door. The deserted street was quiet, but some distance away were three moving figures. Jill was in the center, with Roy and Orsie on either side. Hamp's hand itched for the feel of his revolver, but he couldn't risk hitting Jill.

As if sensing his presence, Roy turned and looked behind. At sight of Hamp coming down the walk, he fired the pistol in his hand. Hamp jumped into the protection of a doorway and the bullet shattered the plate-glass window. Jill turned, white-faced, and then was hauled along the walk by Gettel.

They had to have horses, Hamp knew, and the street had been stripped bare in the short time it took Roy to get from the Border Saloon to the street again. They'd be heading for the livery now. Hamp was in the doorway of a drygoods store. He pushed through the door and was met by several frightened faces.

"Stay inside," he commanded curtly. Then he was racing through the store to the back.

In the alley again, he headed toward the back door of the livery stable. It was a large barn with a runway between the stalls, open at each end. At one time there had been a door on the back, but when the hinges rusted the door had been taken down and never replaced. What use was there for a door in that hot country?

HAMP edged up to the opening, wanting to burst in but knowing that he couldn't fire until he was sure of Jill's position. They would be saddling up. Hamp waited, hoping that they would come out the back door, and without Jill. Once on the road, she would only be a hindrance to them. He heard the creak of leather, as of men mounting, and backed several steps away from the doorway.

Orsie Gettel came out leading a claybank gelding. He had not yet spotted Hamp as he said, "I'd like to get that Walkinshaw in my sights just once more. I could use that five hundred you promised."

"I'm not hanging around to see it done," Roy answered, from inside the barn. "Let's get going."

Gettel started to mount. Hamp said, "I'm right here, Gettel. It's your big chance."

The nearness of Hamp stunned the gunman for a moment. Then his hand was streaking for his revolver. It came up, but Hamp's gun roared first. Gettel stood as if held up by invisible wires for a moment, his face blank. A spot of red appeared on the front of his

shirt. Then he dropped at his mount's feet in a heap.

Hamp shoved his smoking gun back into its holster as he heard the pound of hoofs inside the barn. Roy was going out the other way, having been warned by the shooting. Hamp grabbed the reins of the claybank and led him back into the barn. Jill stood at the entrance to one of the stalls, leaning weakly against an upright post. When she saw him she came forward, but he kept walking.

"Don't go, Hamp," she pleaded. "Let him ride away. You'll solve nothing by going after him."

"He killed Tom," Hamp said. "Or weren't you going to tell me that he admitted it?"

"He'll kill you," she said, her voice rising. "What good will that do?"

She took hold of his arm, and for a moment he looked down at her. She was right, he knew. His going after Roy would solve nothing, for everything was already solved. But Roy had killed Tom, and the thought drove him on. Perhaps it was because he felt some guilt himself. Perhaps if he had trusted Tom a little more, Tom would have—but no, that wasn't the answer, either. Tom hadn't told him of his suspicions of Roy because he hadn't been sure. He shoved his left foot into the stirrup. "Hamp, don't go," Jill cried.

He looked over his shoulder. "It's got to be done, Jill," he told her. "He's killed once and he'll kill again. I can't let him go, knowing that."

He swung into the saddle and glanced once more at her. Her eyes were swimming in tears. He put the horse into motion and rode from the barn. In that moment he was sure that he would not come back to Oro Blanco, no matter what happened between him and Roy. There was too much of Tom here, and too much of lying and suspicion. It would be much better to drift on when his job was done, and recapture his old way of life. He put the spurs to the horse and started off.

Roy had a good start on him. As Hamp left town, he looked behind and saw Lind, surrounded by several men. They would be getting up a posse, but it would be too late. He turned and glued his eyes on the fleeing man before him, letting the claybank out to a full run.

It was some distance to the first hills, but Hamp found he wasn't gaining much on Roy's sorrel. If Roy got into the rough country way ahead, there would be little chance of finding him. But the claybank was giving its every ounce of strength already.

It was some time later that Roy disappeared from his sight for a moment. They were near the foot of the hills, and Roy had dropped over a low rise. Hamp rode on at a breakneck pace, knowing that Roy might have stopped, planning to bushwhack him. But he figured that Roy would be in too much of a hurry to stop, and he was right. Roy was still riding hard when Hamp saw him again.

Then Roy's sorrel began to slow. Roy's greater weight told on the animal—that and the uphill grade into the hills. Hamp saw that he was definitely gaining. Roy, knowing that his mount was too weary to do much climbing, steered into a steep, rocky ravine. Hamp urged the claybank forward. He had to get to Roy before nightfall or he'd lose him sure.

The running horse entered the ravine and Hamp saw, too late, just how rocky the floor of it was. The claybank slipped on the smooth surface of a buried boulder and went down. Hamp tumbled from the saddle, trying to twist so as to fall on his shoulder. But it did not work; he came down head first. There was a bright flash of light, and then all went dark.

He came to his senses, minutes later, with a pounding headache. He forced his muscles into motion, and rolled over just as the crack of a revolver sounded. Lead thudded into the place where he had just been.

SCRAMBLING to his hands and knees, he crawled to the slight shelter provided by a nearby ledge. The gun sounded again, and a bullet kicked up sand only inches away from his face. But now he had Roy placed, for whatever good it would do him.

He checked his revolver and waited. He was within six inches of being in Roy's line of fire, but that six inches protection was enough. The day wore on, and Hamp realized that Roy was waiting for night. But he couldn't wait that long.

He shouted, "Give yourself up, Roy. There's a posse coming. You won't stand a chance with them."

The words bounced around the rocky draw and Roy's voice, tight with panic, came back.

"They won't find us before dark. When they get here I'll be gone."

He fired down, and Hamp had to hug the back wall of his hideout. Hamp shouted again, knowing that words were useless. But it was necessary to try. Roy didn't bother to answer.

Dusk deepened, coming early to the steep-sided ravine. Still Roy made no move. Hamp had been hoping that Roy would panic into movement at the first darkness, but he had more patience than Hamp had given him credit for. He waited another fifteen minutes and then he knew he'd have to make a move himself.

It was shadowy, a tricky time of evening when things appear that aren't really there. Hamp crouched against the back wall of the overhanging ledge and then shoved away, sprinting into the open, heading for the protection of boulders beneath Roy's position.

The action caught Roy by surprise. Hamp was halfway across the open ground before Roy managed to get off a shot. Then it was off the target, and plowed up dirt behind Hamp. He dove for the rocks as Roy fired again. The bullet whined over his head.

He didn't waste more time but began to climb, keeping well down. Once he stopped and listened, just as Roy started to move. He had guessed what Hamp was up to, and he was heading up the ravine to where he had left his horse. Hamp broke into the open.

Roy was waiting, but he fired too soon. Hamp, in his high-heeled boots, slipped, losing his balance. Roy's shot seared a shallow furrow across his left shoulder.

Roy, his face white and frantic, tried to turn and run, but he was too late. Even as Hamp fell, he triggered off a shot. He was ready to trigger off another when Roy crumpled. He hung for a moment on the boulder on which he had been standing, then rolled limply off and slid down a gravel slope to the bottom of the ravine. He didn't move then. He never would again.

Hamp made camp deep in the hills that night. He had seen the posse coming in the last light of the day and had ridden up the ravine and over the top. Within two hours he had found a small spring, and now he had a fire going. He sat staring into it, waiting for the old feeling to return, the feeling of carefree abandon that had always shoved him from one place to another. But all he could think of was Tom Ralston—and Jill Foster.

As he looked into the flames, it came to him that he wanted to go back to Box W. He got to his feet and kicked dirt into the fire. There were some remnants of the old restlessness left in him; there probably always would be. But that was no reason to run—and that was what it would be if he kept on, running from responsibility.

He saddled the sorrel that Roy had ridden and turned back the way he had come. His thoughts were of Jill now. He kept remembering the concern for him she had shown whenever they were together, and he began to wonder what kind of a fool he had been. Did a girl have to hand her heart to him on a silver platter before he knew she was in love with him?

He set the sorrel into fast motion and began to drop down out of the mountains. Unbidden, a tuneless whistle came to his lips. It was then that the old carefree spirit returned to him. This was an even better feeling than he used to have. He wasn't running away now, but coming back to someone he loved—and who loved him.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

Movie News Roundup by BOB CUMMINGS—Next Issue!

A Review of Columbia's

SECRET OF TREASURE MOUNTAIN

Starring WILLIAM PRINCE and VALERIE FRENCH

PLUS

A Word and Picture Personality Sketch of

VALERIE FRENCH

SLEEPY JOE HAD a fight on his hands, a girl on his mind, and trouble all around . . . but he had to handle them his own way . . .

The Easy Way

By Alice Axtell

SLEEPY JOE CHALMERS got up reluctantly from the bench where he had been sitting. Not that he wasn't hungry, nor that the meals on the JR weren't good, but when you had to sit on dynamite, so to speak, to get it, the savor went out of the food. He fell in behind Pop Young, filed into the cookshack with the rest of the men, and sat down at the table. Buck Jenkins was sitting across from him. The rest of the men filled in their places; silent, a little sullen.

Before he thought, Sleepy remarked, "Seems like the boss hasn't been in to take supper with us for a good while. Is he sick?"

The foreman shook his head silently, but Buck wouldn't let it go. He said, "If he's not sick, he must be feeling ashamed. He's hardly shown his face for the last three months. Doesn't that show who's right?"

The foreman said dryly, "It just shows he's not blessed with as pretty a face as yours, Buck."

Down the table, Pop Young made a muttering sound. Sleepy sighed and began to hurry with his meal.

"I have a pretty face, huh?" Buck said. "Hear, Pop? If the foreman says so, it must be so."

Pop Young growled, "That doesn't alter my opinion of you. I haven't heard my girl Rosa saying anything favorable about you either, if you want to know."

Buck answered over a mouthful, "You'll be the worst father-in-law I ever had. The only sense you show is about money. A man with a family has to have money; you do know that much."

Pop dropped his fork. "Family," he yelled. "You haven't any. You weren't keen on courting Rosa, either, until this business of half pay came up. You're just using her as an excuse to get what you want, that's all. And if it hadn't been for you, my family wouldn't be in want now. The rest of the men were satisfied to take half pay for a little while longer and let me draw my full wages. But no, not you. So I had to take half pay along with the rest of you."

Buck looked up, his heavy face hard and obstinate. "If the rest of you had stuck with me, we could have made the boss pay us all up, instead of stalling us off with half pay

"Why don't you stop seeing Buck?" Joe said. "Your father hates him."

like he's done. Don't tell me he hasn't any money; he owns this place, doesn't he? We should have quit our jobs till he paid up."

The foreman looked up. "Go ahead. Why don't you?"

Sleepy grunted a little, seeing the look that Buck gave the foreman, before he started eating again. Buck's glance was sullen, and edged with slyness. Sleepy didn't like it.

He thought about quitting, but it went against the grain. It was not the money he would lose that bothered him or the trouble he would have in finding a new job, with winter coming on. It was just that he was a fool who hated to give up. He would rather find an easy way of doing something than to give up and start over, as a rule. He liked the easy way; that was why they called him Sleepy.

Pop Young said bitterly, "I can't afford to quit any kind of job. Otherwise I'd have walked out a long time ago, just to keep from having to look at your pretty face. Pretty face, ha! Keep it away from Rosa."

Buck looked at him, grinning. "I'll see Rosa any time I please."

Sleepy and the foreman spoke together, and

the foreman's voice cracked, whip-like. "Hold on, Pop. Take it easy. Sit down and shut up, both of you. Buck, if you start any trouble with a woman, I'll fire you right away. I can run this place without you, and don't you forget it."

There was a sudden silence. Buck looked at his plate; Pop Young subsided. The meal ended without any more words, but what had already been said gave the meal a bad flavor. Pop Young fell in beside Sleepy as they filed out of the cook shack. Buck elbowed his way out ahead of them, and the older man watched him go with as much worry in his expression as anger.

"Sleepy, I wish you'd come over this evening and keep Rosa from seeing too much of that loud-mouthed no-good. I hate him but I can't afford to do anything about it—not with a wife and four kids, and me only getting half pay."

Sleepy grunted. "I don't want the job; it'll lead to trouble. Buck thinks she's his girl. She must have told him she wanted to be."

"She's done no such thing," Pop denied, vehemently. "I asked her straight out, and she gave me an honest answer. She has no such idea yet, and I don't want her getting it. Damn Buck. He's not bad-looking, and that counts with a woman. And he's a good worker with an eye out for money. Rosa could get to like him, and I can't stand that. Sleepy, she likes you. It isn't going to hurt you to talk to the girl for a few evenings, is it?"

Sleepy kicked at a clod. "I haven't anything to talk about," he muttered. "Talk's hard, with a woman."

"Aw, it's not that bad. Sleepy, I call you my friend; I always have."

Sleepy groaned. "Well, all right. If it'll keep things going along easy, I'll come."

"Going along easy," Pop Young repeated. "I'll be satisfied if they just keep going, and the boss pays us off when the beef's sold."

BOTH men turned toward the main house at the sound of slightly raised voices. The boss, John Reynolds, was going toward the house, and Buck had fallen in beside him.

"Shining up to the boss," Pop Young snorted. "That's what beats me. That's what makes me sick to my stomach. Buck really expects folks to think as much of him as he does of himself."

Sleepy watched the two men walking slowly toward the house. The boss's shoulders were stiff. He was a very old man, and there was not much danger of his making a fool of himself over a glib tongue. This guess of Sleepy's was immediately confirmed by the old man's impatient, contemptuous gesture of dismissal to Buck.

Turning back to Pop, Sleepy said, "Well, I'll go put a clean shirt on and come and talk to Rosa soon," he muttered. "But I'm doing no courting, mind that. And you might as well tell her so."

Pop Young snorted. "You aren't very complimentary to a good girl, who's good-looking, too, if I do say so about my own daughter. But I'd rather hear that than the things Buck tells her. Don't be too long."

Sighing, Sleepy left him and went to tidy up, at least to the extent of putting on a clean shirt and shaving. But he went reluctantly. He had a premonition that trouble would come of this, and he always avoided trouble. But more than that, he was frightened of the twinkle in Rosa's eyes whenever she looked at him. "You'll come to me," the twinkle seemed to say. "I know you don't want to, but you'll come by and by."

"No I won't—not the way you think," Sleepy muttered to himself. "I don't know that I'd mind having a wife, but I'm not going to let her, whoever she may be, push me into it. So you can go laugh somewhere else, Miss Rosa. I like your father, though. I like him fine."

Pop Young and his family had one of the two sturdy cabins that had been built when JR was being built. The foreman had the other. As Sleepy walked toward the Young place he saw the flowering vines over the porch, the garden, the pup sunning himself in the yard. A place looked different when there was a family in it, all right.

Rosa was sitting on the porch steps, and he sat down beside her. He looked at her and she looked back. "Now you see here, woman," he said vehemently. "I'm not here for courting; don't get any notions in your head. I just haven't anything better to do."

"Well, that's fine," the girl said mildly. "I guess I haven't anything better to do, either. That makes us even, doesn't it?"

Sleepy sat.

Presently Rosa said, "What's the matter? You look miserable. Why don't you say something? You're not tongue-tied, are you?"

Sleepy sighed. It was no use for him to try to be entertaining; that was a thing he just couldn't do. He might as well admit it. "I'm not tongue-tied, no; I just haven't anything to say. What do I know except stock and hay and summer and winter and stuff like that?"

The girl laughed a little. "Well, for that matter, what do I know except vegetables and cooking and canning and milking the cow? But if you can't find anything else to say, tell me what's the matter with Daddy. He's worrying himself into a lather over something, and I'll bet it's not worth the trouble."

Sleepy grinned at her. "All right, you asked for it. You know he can't get along with Buck. Why don't you stop seeing Buck, and make your father feel better?"

The girl's face got red. "Oh, nonsense. That doesn't amount to anything. He ought to know that."

"A burr doesn't amount to anything, either," Sleepy said, dryly, "as long as it isn't under your saddle."

Somehow he was vaguely disappointed. The girl's concern for her father had seemed genuine, as though she really cared. Yet at the first suggestion of personal sacrifice, she ducked out of it.

The pup in the yard sat up, and his tail thumped the ground sharply. Someone was walking toward the cabin. By Rosa's sigh, and the fact that the pup hadn't barked, Sleepy guessed who it was.

But his mind changed about the girl a little again. She had sighed, not smiled. Buck came up to the porch. Sleepy half expected trouble, but the man's voice was quiet.

"You here, Sleepy? I've been looking for you. Say, you usually seem to know how the men will figure a thing. If I can come up with a sure-fire scheme to get them their money now, not some time next year, will they stick with me?"

Sleepy said cautiously, "What kind of a scheme?"

Buck's anger flared up. "I want to know whose side you're on—mine or the old man's—before I talk. Make up your mind. You can't just sit on the fence."

SLEEPY got up, stretching restlessly. "I still haven't heard any side to take. What kind of idea do you have that'll put money into the boss's pocket so he can pay us off?"

Buck's lips curled. "Money in his pocket? Don't give me that. He has this place, hasn't he? It's worth plenty."

"Can't say that I blame him for wanting to keep it."

"Can you blame me for wanting the full amount of my pay? I've earned it, haven't I?"

"No," Sleepy admitted. "I can't say that I blame you, either."

"So there you are, just like you've always been. You won't move one way or the other." He thrust his face close to Sleepy's. "Let me tell you one thing. From now on, as far as I'm concerned, if you're not with me you're against me."

He wheeled and went off into the darkness.

Sleepy took an uneasy step or two after him, and then remembered that Rosa was still there and that she might be hurt if everybody walked out on her. He was vague and uneasy about it, but he turned back.

"I have to go, I guess. I have a little thinking to do. I can't quite figure Buck out. If he were a pot, I'd say he was coming to a boil."

The girl's voice, answering him in the dusk, was gentle. "Think all you want to, Sleepy. Sit down and think here, if you like. I'll keep quiet."

"I think best on my feet," he said. "But thanks anyhow."

Wandering through the growing darkness, he stood a while in the barn door, listening to the restless stamping and snorting that the horses made, his thoughts switching from the haymaking that must begin tomorrow to a vague and growing uneasiness within himself that he couldn't quite grasp.

Haymaking and mowing machines and men and teams; a hay crop and an old man who had money trouble. An old man who might, considering his age, be fighting his last battle

to save the work of a lifetime. A bitter fight it must be, now that his children had all gone and left him and the home place, and there was nothing but pride and habit holding him to his work. It wouldn't take much to knock him out, judging by the way he had looked lately.

And yet, when you tried to pin it down, what was there to suggest trouble coming? Nothing much but a mean, sly look in a man's eyes, and a greed in him that was as much part of him as his breathing. Buck could never see the other feller's side of a thing, even at his best. At his worst—well, what would he do? What could he do, bearing in mind that it might not take much of a push to finish John Reynolds?

Sleepy's restless wandering took him back toward the cabins again. Rosa was not on the porch now. He looked on purpose, though he grunted at himself for doing it. He went past Pop Young's cabin and on into the doorway of the other one, where the middle-aged foreman had spent the many years of his employment on the JR.

Sleepy stopped and spoke into the darkness, hearing stirring sounds within. "Are you there, Mack?"

"Yeah," the foreman said. "I'm here, same as I always am. What is it?"

Sleepy wiped his face on his sleeve; he was sweating suddenly. "It's not anything. I mean, it is, only it isn't. Uh—did you ever think how easy it'd be for you to fall off a haystack, sav?"

"Me? Why would I do that?"

"Uh—well, suppose somebody else stepped into your shoes for a few weeks. It wouldn't take much to fix things so the hay crop didn't get made, would it? If we're delayed a week or so, it'll be getting colder, and we can expect a killing frost any night. Then there'll be no hay crop, and no winter feed. You know the boss's fix better than I do; you know how it would affect him."

"It wouldn't do him any good," the foreman admitted, dryly. "But if we're both thinking of the same party causing trouble, forget it. Not that I'm not obliged to you, but any time I can't take care of myself with a windbag like Buck is, it's time somebody stepped into my shoes. Better turn in now and get that sleep of yours, Sleepy. We'll have work to do tomorrow."

Work began on the JR at dawn. The sky was still pale in the east as Sleepy went to the barns. The hills which stood up all around the valley floor were still blurred dark masses, and the wind was quiet. It was a fine day for haying, and high time they got about it, too, for the smell of coming frost was in the stillness and the faint dampness and the chill.

The day started off well enough. Breakfast went by without any fuss, and Buck kept his mouth shut for once, as the foreman told off the jobs. The JR was an old fashioned place when it came to haymaking. There was no hay baler to pick up the straw and bale it right in the field; the place was too far from gas and oil and repairs to depend on machines like that.

The boss had bought a jeep once and was still making use of it, but for haymaking it was mostly horse teams and mowers, and rake and sweep and stacker to put up what they cut. The mower men tried to keep just enough ahead of the stacker men so that they could put up what was cut and cured before too much more got down. That way, if it started to rain, not too much hay would spoil.

THEY worked the far fields first, and finished up down below the barns, and fed the stock more or less likewise, so that a man could stay snug inside most of the time in the winter. The JR was high and cold and lonely in winter time. Maybe that was why the old man's children had all left and he was finishing out his years alone.

Mostly Sleepy worked with the mower men and Buck ran the stacker, while old Pop Young handled the sweep and the foreman stacked. They started out that way, but by mid-morning, when the hay was good and dry, the foreman took Sleepy off the mower and had him change places with Young.

"I don't know that I'm doing you any favor," the foreman said, "but Pop hates Buck's guts till he can't leave him alone and, for once, Buck seems to be trying to get along peaceably. He's the best man on the place on the stacker. Keep the hay coming in, Sleepy. My bones are talking about frost."

Sleepy grunted. It wasn't exactly a favor, working with Buck. He was a hard man to work with. He was good, and he knew it too well. But they made a start on the stack, Sleepy bringing in the hay with the sweep and Buck driving the jeep that pulled up the stacker, and the foreman on the stack, keeping it built up evenly and taken in gradually so that it would shed water. The day went on.

They were getting ready to top the second stack and finish up, when Sleepy stopped to change teams and get a drink. The foreman called down to him from the stack, "Hang that jug on a pitchfork and pass it up here, Sleepy. I'm dry."

Sleepy did so, and the foreman sat down on the side of the stack and grinned down at him. "I haven't fallen off yet, Sleepy."

Sleepy looked across at Buck, who was momentarily busy with the jeep. "I might have been dreaming up things," he admitted. "He's a good hand—I have to say that for him."

"He wouldn't be here if he weren't. I've never seen a better man on a stacker. He can put a load just about anywhere I want it, so I don't have to work it around hardly at all. He can hit the rope slack enough to dump it short, or hard enough to fall to the far side, every time."

Mack handed the jug down, dangling on the tines of his fork, and stood up and tightened his belt. "All right, let's get this job finished."

Sleepy climbed up on the sweeper, sent the team out on a trot, brought a sweeper load of hay up onto the stacker, then backed the team away for another load. The bay horse had to buck and kick a little, wheeling Sleepy half around toward the stacks again. He saw the stacker rise, fast and hard, looming above the stack with the load of hay, as it always did.

The forman stood close to the edge on the near side, waiting for the load of hay to fall beyond him. The stacker rope snapped up tight, and Sleepy grunted. The way the rope pulled up, so hard and fast, looked as if for once Buck had hit it too hard and the hay would fall too far over and slide to the ground.

Then Sleepy saw the rope end fly up, broken, like a snapped whip, and strike the man standing on the stack. Mack began to fall, Sleepy saw. He heard himself yelling. Then the whole load of hay dumped short and came down. Sleepy lashed the team into a run and headed for the stack. He was there first; Buck was closer, but he wasn't there yet.

The stacker load of hay had slid off the stack. The foreman's arm was lying out from under it, the rope twisted into the hay. That was all Sleepy could see at first.

He dug frantically into the hay with his hands, and the foreman's twisted body began to come into sight. He was not dead, but from the way he laid, it looked as if his right leg was broken for sure.

Buck came pounding up. "The damn rope broke, right under the knot. Is he hurt?"

"He's hurt plenty. The rope snapped around him, and knocked him and the hay

SHARE THE WORK!

By S. Omar Barker

He treats his wife good—
Here witness the facks:
She chops all the wood,
But he whets the ax!

right off the stack. How'd you happen to do that?"

"Me?" Buck said. "He rigged the stacker himself. Maybe I hit it a little hard, but it should have held. Is he likely to die? He sure looks funny."

Sleepy straightened up. He had gotten the foreman's limp body free from the stacker rope and the hay that had fallen on him. "I'm no doctor," he said curtly. "Bring the jeep. We'll get Mack home and the boss can take him to town."

Buck drove, and Sleepy held the foreman as carefully as he could. They headed for the foreman's cabin, but, going past Young's, Sleepy called to Buck to stop.

"The women might know something about doctoring. Let's stop here."

Young's wife came out of the house as they stopped, and she didn't seem to need any explanations. "Hurt, is he? Rosa, come here. Bob, you run fetch that cot you sleep on. We'll get him on that. After that go hunt up Mr. Reynolds."

Buck spoke up. He'd hardly said a word since the foreman had been hurt, but now he spoke up. I'll go. I want to see the old man."

Sleepy took a step or two with him. "Better tell the boss we'll go back out and finish that stack. We can top it ourselves. It'll only need a few more loads."

"Tell him, ha! I'll tell him—"

Sleepy stared.

"Tell him! Here's my chance, and don't think I won't jump at it. I have the old man over a barrel now. He has to put somebody in charge, and it'll have to be me. I'm the best worker he has. I know how to go ahead, and the men'll follow me. I'll get my pay all right now. The boss'll pay up now."

Sleepy spoke up sharply, before he thought. 'Go get him, and stop shooting off your big mouth. Put your mind on getting a top on that stack before the weather gets bad."

Buck wheeled, and for a minute he almost flew into a rage.

"That's right—you're against me, you always have been. I won't forget it. You don't need to expect any favors when I step into Mack's shoes."

He went off.

SLEEPY looked after him. Something had gone wrong, all right, though he probably never would know just how it had happened. Sleepy Joe Chalmers would be hunting another job before long. He helped get the foreman's limp body onto the cot, and then stood back with a feeling of relief as Rosa's mother started to ease him and tend him. It seemed like it was a good thing to have women around when there was sickness.

Rosa came to him, a scared horror crowding the pity out of her face. "Sleepy, how did this happen? I mean, did Buck—"

Sleepy didn't try to argue with her. "I don't know. The rope broke; that's all I saw."

Her hands closed over his arm, nervous and clinging. "Now I am scared. I heard what he said to you. If Buck takes the foreman's place—oh, poor Daddy! Oh, if my silly flirting had anything to do with this!"

Sleepy had an odd desire to comfort. It was odd for him, anyhow, for he had never felt it toward anything except a hurt pup or colt, before. "It probably didn't. Buck was what he is, long before he ever saw you or the JR. I wouldn't worry about it."

It was queer how her eyes looked up at him, scared and eased both. "I guess that's right. I was afraid you were going to scold—I'd better go help Mom now."

Old John Reynolds came up the steps behind her. As the old man leaned over the foreman's cot and called his name, he looked his age. He called Mack's name as if he were calling his last friend. He couldn't have many friends left, at that. The people he'd grown up with, loved, married, or befriended, were gone.

Rosa's mother spoke up quietly. "He has a broken leg and broken ribs for sure, and there may be other things. He ought to go to a doctor. If it just weren't so far!"

The old man straightened himself slowly. "I'll take the jeep and drive him to town. I know how to rig it up; I've done it before. Bob can go with me. Sleepy, I want to talk to you a minute."

Sleepy followed the boss down to the foreman's cabin and leaned against the wall in the shade. When the old man spoke he sounded as dry and matter-of-fact as ever.

"I'll have to stay with Mack for a few days. I need a man to take his place while I'm gone. That's likely to be till after the haymaking is finished. How about it, Sleepy—can you handle it?"

Sleepy jerked up from his lounging position. "Me? No! I thought Buck—I wasn't expecting to hear you say this."

Reynolds snorted. "Buck! I can't turn my interests over to Buck Jenkins. He doesn't know there are any interests but his own."

"It doesn't seem that I'm cut out for it, boss. Honest it doesn't."

Reynolds shuffled his feet a little. "Well, if you don't want to take the responsibility, why you don't. I wouldn't want to push you."

Sleepy said hurriedly, "Now wait a minute. Let me think it over."

What was it about the old man's hands and his sagging shoulders that cried despair? Nothing in his talk was out of the ordinary. He sounded like he always did. Sleepy felt sorry for him somehow. But then Sleepy thought of taking on the whole load. He groaned and looked for a way out.

"Honest, boss, wouldn't the easiest way out of it be to pay Buck up and let him run the show until Mack gets on his feet again?"

The old man's mouth twisted. "From what Buck said, and the way he said it, he wants more than that. Buck sees a chance to crack the whip and he'll make the most of it, just to show his power. I'd have paid my hands in full before now, if I could have borrowed or begged a dime more. And begging comes hard to me."

Sleepy sigher. "It's not the haymaking; I could handle that easily enough. It's, well—I'm no hand to handle trouble, you know that. I'd rather go around it."

"Show me some way around this." The old man's voice sounded harsh against Sleepy's ears. "I can get over the hump if I can pull through the winter in good shape. And I have to pull through—I just plain have to. My grandson wants to come back. I haven't told anybody else but Mack. He can't stand a factory job any longer, and he has a crippled baby besides. He wants to come to JR, but he can't make it before next summer."

The worn, gnarled old hands locked together. The old man looked out at the fields and hills that had made up his long life's work, and Sleepy dropped his eyes hurriedly. Maybe high hills and open sky made up a cathedral; they could. Anyway, the old man was praying, sure enough.

"I have to pull through. My son's boy wants to come home—one of my family wants to come."

Sleepy sighed once more and said gently, "All right, boss. I'll do the best I can. I wish there were a better choice, but I'll do what I can."

BUCK showed up just when they'd gotten the cot, with Mack resting on it, strapped on to the jeep, and Reynolds ready to start off.

"All right, Reynolds," he said roughly, "I'm done fooling with you. Either I get the job and my pay in full, plus a raise, or I'm going to quit and pull the rest of the men off with me."

Reynolds looked down at him from the jeep and Sleepy thought he smiled faintly, under the shadow of his hat brim. "I haven't time to fool with you, either. Talk it over with the boss, there." He nodded down at Sleepy, and started the jeep on the long journey to a doctor.

Buck wheeled, and Sleepy stiffened, his nerves and muscles pulling tight. He had never seen a look on any man's face like he saw then.

Buck leaned close. "You?"

"That's the way I heard it. Keep your shirt on, it's only temporary."

Buck straightened up. "What are you going to do?"

Sleepy glanced up at the sun. "Why I'd say we better get out and finish topping that stack. We have just about time enough to do it before the rest of the men come in."

Anything to get the wild look off the man's face, get him to talking and blowing big about himself again.

Sleepy had never thought he'd be glad to hear a loud mouth going again, but it was so now.

"I see. You took the old man's side. I might have known it."

He straightened up and looked down at his hand. Sleepy's eyes followed his glance

and saw the big, blunt fingers opening and closing around a pocket knife, before dropping it back into his pocket.

"I see. I see all right." He went off.

Sleepy shook himself slowly, with a feeling that he was just coming out of deep water.

Rosa clutched his arm. "Sleepy, what are you going to do?"

"Well, I guess I'm going to go out and top that stack, then bring the teams in. If Buck wants to make trouble—" This couldn't be him, the whole thing must be happening to someone else. "Well, I have a gun. I'm not fancy with it, but we'll be about even." He laughed shortly. Him, turning into a hero! "That's one way to settle it."

"Guns! Oh, no. Sleepy, you could think of something smarter than that, if you'd just try."

"I don't think so. Anyway, I have hay to make now." Was he running away from a fight, falling down on the job the first try?

"Let me come with you. I'm afraid. I'm —I want to keep away from Buck. Anyhow, you need a helper. I can drive the sweep team."

Sleepy looked down at her. She was scared, all right. "Okay, that's not a bad idea. Let's get going."

It was late when they got back to the JR, and dark everywhere when he finished up at the barn. He passed up his supper and headed for his bunk, dreading to meet the men, hating to have them look him over. He felt like a fool, and worse than that.

The bunkhouse was dark; the men had all turned in early. Relief made him grunt. It wasn't until he was lying stretched out, feeling an ache that went all through him, that he began to wonder.

The stillness around him wasn't quite natural; the men weren't sleeping either. And it wasn't natural for them to take that big a change without a word. It was especially unnatural for Buck. He stirred, and half sat up. Should he get up and have it out then and there? And then, slowly, he dropped back to his bunk, and, in the darkness, lay with his arm over his face.

He got up early on purpose. In the darkness inside the bunkhouse, he fumbled around in his belongings until he felt the cold, smooth steel that he was groping for. He tucked the gun inside the top of his pants and pulled his light jacket down to cover it. He wouldn't need the jacket later, but it would answer the purpose now. He went out to the barns, expecting to see some of the men following, before long. Then it dawned on him. None of the men had showed up.

He went back to the bunkhouse and there they were, all but Pop Young, loafing around as if there weren't a lick of work to be done within a thousand miles. Buck was in the middle of them.

Sleepy said, "Quitting work, huh?"

Buck answered him. "We've gone on strike. No pay, no hay cut."

As simple as that. Slowly Sleepy's hands lifted to his jacket, unbuttoned it, and touched the gun, cold and smooth. But still he couldn't believe what he was doing. Him gun a man down? Him? But to do his job he had to, didn't he?

He let his hands slide down, and even his voice sounded like someone else's, odd and flat. "Buck, you'd better watch what you're doing."

HE WENT inside, through the bunkhouse, and out the back door. Out of sight there, he wiped the sweat from his face. It wasn't in him. It just plain wasn't in him. He pulled the gun out and stood staring down at it, but after a while he dropped it back into his jacket pocket and went over to the cook shack.

The cook was busy at the stove. The coffee was boiling, the bacon was frying, and it all smelled fine. "I have news for you, Cookie. Breakfast's going to be late this morning. Keep it hot, will you?"

He went out and locked the door behind him, and sat on the step, ignoring the cook's yell of protest. "Just keep out of it, Cookie. I can't have you getting hurt."

It wasn't too long before he heard the men coming. He laid the gun on his knee, not threatening, just ready. Buck wasn't among the men. That jolted Sleepy at first, because he was braced for Buck. But then he grasped at it. Maybe he wasn't much and never would be, but if he could just handle a few at a time, he might still be able to turn the trick. The

nerships. Now, what about it? Are you going to take tobacco money, and bed and board, and help the old man over his trouble, or are you going to kick him down the chute and leave on an empty belly?"

It was Jake who finally answered him again. "I'm not so keen on going. But can you keep Buck off our backs?"

Sleepy sighed and stood up. There it was, facing him squarely. He couldn't seem to get around it. "I can."

men halted at sight of him and muttered between themselves.

"Hadn't you heard, boys?" he said, casually. "The JR isn't feeding strikers. No work, no eat."

Nobody said anything, but they stirred and looked at each other. The smell of coffee and bacon came through the windows.

He said, "Where's Buck?"

Finally Jake muttered, "I guess he went to get his gun."

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He took the cookhouse key from his pocket. "Here, go in and eat, and let's get started."

He went back toward the bunkhouse, walking slow, feeling the sweat on his face. It wasn't in him, but a man had to face up to anything that his job needed, no matter what. He went into the bunkhouse. The early morning sunlight fell slantwise across the floor, with dust marking the lines of it. On the far

Sleepy looked toward the bunkhouse. "Look, you men," he said quietly. "I never figured any of you were the kind to kick a dog that was down. The old man told me straight out that he tried borrowing and begging both, to get the money to pay us off. He doesn't have it, that's all. And when it comes to striking, well, I read the papers too. It seems that these businessmen have part-

side of the room Buck faced him. Buck was tight, ready to jump, ready to fight, and dangerous because of that. It was easy to see that.

It took a little effort to speak, but Sleepy managed it. "As the old man's representative, I figure I have to offer you a chance, along with the rest of the men. You can go back to work if you want to—till the hay's in, that is. After that you'd better drift."

"Me back down? We'll settle this where everybody can see. I'm the best man here, and I'll show the whole outfit."

The sweat stood out on his face, and his body twitched a little. He was a man beating himself into finishing what he had cornered himself into starting.

Sleepy spoke slowly. "The men thought they'd rather eat and work, than strike. I told you I'd give you the same chance."

"Back down—let 'em laugh me off the place?"

"You never could stand people laughing at you, could you? All right, I can stand 'em laughing at me. It won't hurt me. I'll give you a loophole to crawl through—till the hay's cut."

Buck's eyes jerked away from his. "I don't know what you're talking about. Get outside now and let's get this over with."

It was over then, and Sleepy knew it. "Mind what you're doing, feller—I'm skittish. Now I'll tell you how you can get out of it, and blow off your mouth as big as ever. I'll keep mine shut for as long as I said I would. The old man told me his grandson was coming home. That's why he wants so badly to hold on. You can play it up, how you forgot your grudge when you heard about the boy's crippled kid."

Buck's mouth was working.

Sleepy dropped his hands away from the gun. He said flatly, "About that stacker rope—I looked it over. I don't think what happened was any accident, but I can't prove it. But if I were you, I'd get off JR when the hay's in."

Buck stared at him for a long minute more, his small dark eyes slowly shifting. He said peevishly, sullenly, "Why didn't you tell me sooner, you lummox! About the old man's grandson, I mean. I have nothing against a crippled kid. I wouldn't—I mean, a kid makes a difference. What do you want me to do, drive the stacker again?"

Sleepy waved him toward the door. "Sure. But go get your breakfast first. We're late."

He leaned against the wall, then slowly pulled off his jacket and dropped it, gun and all, down on his bunk. He was tired, he was sweating, he was sickish, he'd have to live with himself all his life and wonder if he hadn't just taken the easy way out, but he'd gotten out of shooting.

He headed toward Pop Young's cabin when he went out. He'd better round up the older man, too. But it was Rosa who came running to meet him. "Joe, what's happening? Mom made Pop stay in the house. He hates Buck so, he'd have gotten into a fight."

Sleepy's mouth twisted. "I just got out of a fight. Tell your father the trouble's all over. Buck's going back to work with the rest of the men."

She stood still, breathless, her eyes on his face. "Over? Are you sure? Pop said there'd be a shooting."

Sleepy sighed.

"I guess I should have gone through with the shooting. But I didn't. I took the easy way out, that's all. I guess I'm not much; I always will take the easy way. There won't be any shooting."

She stared at him for moment longer, and then threw her arms around him. "All? That's all, Joe Chalmers? No shooting, no trouble, the men all back at work even without their pay? You straightened the whole thing out and then you say that's all?"

Sleepy looked down at her in bewilderment. Was this what they called hysterics? She was laughing and crying together. Now what did he have to do—let her have it out, there in his arms? Odd how easy it was to hold her, and how pleasant.

She began to stop crying and tried to wipe her face. "Oh, Sleepy, you fool, you absolute fool. You don't half know how good a man you are. Never mind, some day I'll tell you. I'll tell you and tell you and tell you. I'll spend the rest of my life convincing you."

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OUTSIDE THE WALL were the kill-crazy Indians . . . inside were two men who hated each other, and the woman they both wanted

PART ONE

SHORTLY after four o'clock, Walt Kincaid came from the adobe house and, squinting against the brassy glare of sunlight, crossed to the gateway in the wall enclosing the stage station against the utter loneliness of Lost Squaw Canyon. There was on his face the scowl of a man not at peace with his world—or with himself. From here he could look along the trace of a road leading to and from the station—and see absolutely nothing but brush thickets, jumbled rocks, and stark cliffs.

Here the Lost Squaw widened to perhaps a quater mile. Since the station was located near the base of the north wall, most of this width lay before the place. To the west, only a hundred yards away, a jutting elbow of canyon wall blotted

out the view. But to the east Kincaid could see for an empty mile or more.

There was a stagecoach through once a day, heading east one day and west the next. Today's would come from the east; it would come at a hard run, pause here for a change of horses and to let its passengers eat, then race on west, on out of the seven-mile gorge toward Fort Sands and the town of Robles.

Freight rigs occasionally used the road, and infrequently some rancher passed, trail-driving a herd. A cavalry patrol sometimes came by, and, more often, a band of Indians. Lost Squaw Canyon was in the heart of the Ute country. Midway to the south wall a vagrant wind raised a dust devil. Overhead, above the canyon's rim, a buzzard wheeled in the pale sky.

Kincaid watched both, seeing them as symbols of his loneliness, and said aloud, "What am I doing here, anyway?"

He'd asked himself that a hundred times before, and the answer was always the same. Where else could he find a job? Men who needed hired hands did not hire ex-convicts, and the stage company had taken him on only because no one else wanted to be agent here. Some men feared the loneliness, more feared the Utes. The former could rob a man of his sanity, the latter could take his very life. Kincaid had held out for six months, longer than any previous agent.

His scowl deepened. He was here alone except for a hostler, the half-breed known as Injun Charlie, and Charlie's Ute woman, Sarah, who did the cooking. Since they counted for nothing, it had to be that his bad temper was for himself. In a way, it was. He had this sticking in his craw: he was where he was and what he was because of another man, and so far he'd not lifted a finger to pay off the debt, to work off his grudge.

If ever a man had reason to kill, Kincaid had. Yet he permitted the man, Ben Drumgold, to stay alive, to go on fouling everything he touched. That was another question he kept asking himself. What are you going to do about Drumgold? He had no answer for that one yet.

He looked at his watch, then turned back across the yard. Woodsmoke rose from the chimney of the main building, telling that the squaw was readying a meal for the passengers on the stage now due. Kincaid went along the gallery, where the half-breed was taking one of his frequent siestas. He prodded the man's slack body with the toe of his boot.

"Time, Charlie."

He turned away as Injun Charlie looked up with incongruous china-blue eyes, knowing that those eyes stared after him with a wicked hatred. Injun Charlie hated all whites. He hated the Utes, too.

At the well, midway between station house and barn, Kincaid filled two wooden buckets with water. Carrying them into the barn, he let the four horses of the relay team drink. Injun Charlie came in to give him a hand with the harnessing, then drifted outside as soon as the chore was completed. Kincaid waited with the animals in the comparative coolness of the barn, rolling and lighting a cigarette.

The breed reappeared. "Riders coming."

"Know them?"

"Nope."

"All right," Kincaid said. "Stay with the horses."

He moved into the yard, feeling once more the full weight of the mid-summer heat. Three horsemen, with a spare animal under light pack, were on the road to the west, coming at a slow walk around the out-thrusting cliff there. He had his look. Then, more alive than he'd been, he strode to the house. When he reappeared, he wore his gun rig and carried a shotgun.

He glanced east through the canyon, saw nothing of the stage, and thought, it's late again today. He turned his attention to the three riders, eying them warily. It was a company rule that station agents be alert if any strangers showed up at stage time. Too many holdups had occurred when a stagecoach was making a station stop and was easier game for road agents than when racing along the trail.

These three were not strangers to Kincaid, but he had no trust in them. The man in the lead was Chris Dolan; he worked—or had worked—for Ben Drumgold. The second man was a hardcase named Lew Thorpe. The third, the one leading the pack-horse, was called Sanchez, though he was no Mexican;

he had a reputation as a gunhand. There was but one way in which to catalogue the three: tough-hands.

DOLAN halted the other two at the gate with a wave of his hand, and came into the station alone. He rode a blaze-faced sorrel gelding. There was a six-shooter at his right thigh, a booted rifle under his right leg. He crossed the yard and reined in facing Kincaid, a heavy-bodied man with a ruddy complexion and a look of deviltry about him. He grinned easily, and he grinned now as he pushed his hat back off his brow. He folded his hands on his saddlehorn and leaned forward, his manner overly friendly.

"How are things, Walt?"

"Things are fine, Chris."

"Haven't seen you since you got out of the pen."

"You're seeing me now."

"That's so, isn't it?" Dolan said, his grin steady—and as worthless as a counterfeit coin. "How long were you in the pen, anyway?"

"Too long—as if you didn't know."

"Sure, I know. I always figured the evidence against you was rigged. I figured it for sure after Ben Drumgold moved your woman over to his ranch."

Kincaid winced but said nothing.

Dolan said, "So you should hate his guts. Right?"

"You're asking that?"

Dolan's grin broadened. "I guess I know the answer," he said. Then, no longer appearing amused, he added, "The question is, how much do you hate him?"

Kincaid glanced at the pair over by the gate. They were slack in their saddles, puffing on cigarettes, seemingly disinterested. Their casual manner seemed as false as Dolan's vanished grin.

"Quit beating around the bush, Chris," Kincaid said. "Say what's on your mind."

"Drumgold will be on today's stage," Dolan said. "We had word from a friend up north. Our friend found out when the big man planned to leave Denver, and wrote us a letter. We figured train and stage times, and Drumgold's due on today's stage." He paused, watching Kincaid intently for a moment. "I haven't been working for him for quite a while. He did me dirt, and I aim to get even. It seemed as if you'd want to work off your grudge too. I heard you were here at Lost Squaw, and I figured I'd let you throw in with us."

"Throw in with you for what?"

"Drumgold'll have thirty thousand dollars in specie with him—cattle money. We'll split it four ways."

"No. When I even my score with Drumgold, it'll be in my own way."

"He owes you plenty, man."

"So he does. But I'm no thief."

"Maybe you're just scared."

"Maybe I am," Kincaid said. "And you'd better be, too—scared of going to prison. There'll be more people than Ben Drumgold on that stage. Driver, shotgun messenger, passengers—they'll be witnesses, Chris, who'll put you in Canon City."

Dolan shook his head. "You don't get it," he said. "You'll be in the clear, and we three will drop from sight. Lew and Sanchez and I will throw down on the driver and shotgun messenger when the stage pulls in. Drumgold won't be any trouble, he never packs a gun. All you'll have to do it act as if we have the drop on you, as if we took your guns. We'll ride out with the money, not acting as though you had a hand in it. Later, when we're in the clear, we'll get your share of the loot to you."

Kincaid showed a miserly smile. "I can see you sharing with me, Chris."

"I give you my word, Walt."

"Your word's no good," Kincaid told him. "And I wouldn't throw in with you and those two hardcases if your word were as good as gospel. I told you I'm no thief." He thumbed back both hammers of the shotgun. "Clear out, Chris."

Dolan jerked erect in the saddle, his face darkening with anger. "All right, play the fool," he said. "Let Drumgold get away with what he pulled on you." He lifted his reins and started to turn the sorrel away. Then, holding it there, he added, "The trouble with you is, you're not man enough to square accounts, even with somebody who framed you into prison and stole your woman." He sneered. "You have no guts."

Kincaid gestured with the shotgun. "Chris, clear out."

"Not yet," Dolan said. "There's one thing more. We're pulling it off, with or without you. If not here where it's easy, then down-canyon where it'll be tough. And I'm warning you, Kincaid—if the driver and his gun guard are ready for us, we'll know you tipped them off and, by damn, we'll come back here and cut out your tongue!"

He jabbed spurs to the sorrel, and ran it across the yard and through the gateway. He turned west along the road, the other two swinging in behind him. Soon they vanished beyond the jutting canyon wall. Kincaid stood there under the gallery's warped roof, stung by Dolan's words. The truth could hurt.

He was a tall and lanky man of thirty-four, a handsome man in a rugged sort of way. He had faded yellow hair and gun-metal gray eyes. He'd developed into a humorless man during the past seven years, the years that Ben Drumgold had taken from him. Seven years and my wife, he thought. By taking the one, Drumgold had gotten the other. He had known he would; that was how he'd planned it. That was why he'd planned it, because he'd wanted Nora.

WITH his mind's eye, Kincaid turned back the calendar and saw again how it had been. In those days he possessed two things he loved, his ranch and his wife. The ownership of Anchor Ranch, even with a top-heavy mortgage, made him his own boss—his own man. He rode its lush grassland with the feeling that here, of all places on earth, was where he belonged.

His headquarters was solidly built, of log and stone, the ranch-house planned so that a woman would fit into it. And that woman was named Nora. His memory of her had not grown dim, but its luster was badly tarnished. He'd met her on a trip to Denver, and knew, at first sight, that she was the woman of his dreams—a girl with an Irish brogue on her lips, a mischievous gleam in her eyes, a provocative smile on her lips that made him very much aware that he was a man. When he returned to Anchor, he brought Nora with him.

They'd had two good years, happy years, though there were no children—no son, as he'd hoped—and at times Nora was difficult. He learned that there was sadness as well as gaiety in her, and a restlessness too. The loneliness of the cattle country bothered her. She needed to be among people, many people. By nature she was a town girl, and she came to feel exiled, to hate Anchor Ranch, to consider her husband not company enough.

The nearest town was Robles, thirty miles away. They went there as often as he could get away from the ranch, but not often enough for Nora. Their nearest neighbor was Ben Drumgold, on his great Crescent Ranch, but there was no Mrs. Drumgold with whom Nora could have been friendly. There was usually a woman in Crescent's big ranchhouse, one or another of the cheap women who paraded through Drumgold's life, but Kincaid would not have Nora associating with that sort.

It was when they'd been married two years that Drumgold began to visit them. Kincaid had no illusions; he knew that the man did not seek his company, but that Nora had caught his eye. Drumgold was a hunter of women, a rustler of other men's wives. So finally, coming in off the range one afternoon and finding the man there, he knew Drumgold's visits must come to an end.

When Drumgold was about to leave, Kincaid had said, "Ben, don't come back."

Drumgold understood. He shrugged, smiled faintly as though amused, and said, "All right, Walt."

He had not come again, but three weeks later Sheriff Mitch Worden and two deputies showed up. They arrested Kincaid on a rustling charge. The evidence against him was thirty head of Crescent cattle hidden in a small box canyon at the edge of his range, their quarter-moon brand worked over into his anchor iron.

It was a time when rustlers were causing the big outfits heavy losses, and so the law set out to make an example of him. Not even his attorney believed his story that he was being framed, that somebody—Crescent hands, of course—had planted the blotch-branded cattle on his range. He wasn't permitted to make that charge in the courtroom. A jury composed of cattlemen quickly found him guilty. And the judge, a man who sat on the bench because of Ben Drumgold's political influence,

The moon was just coming up when the Ute band returned.

sentenced Kincaid to ten years in the penitentiary.

Nora was in the courtroom during the trial, a stunned-looking Nora. She visited him once in prison, and wrote him regularly for a few months. Then for nearly a year he heard nothing from her. When he did hear again, it was in the form of a legal document served on him while he was working in a chain gang on the road south of Canon City—a notice that Nora had applied for a divorce.

He did have one fairly regular visitor during his first year in prison—old Sam Rawles, who'd been his hired hand. Sam kept him posted, and told him that rustlers were running off his cattle and the bank was foreclosing on his ranch. Sam had told him, too, about Nora moving into the big house at Crescent Ranch, as Ben Drumgold's new mistress. So he lost the two things he loved, his ranch and his wife.

Ten years they gave him. He served almost seven. Good behavior made him eligible for parole, and after that many years nobody was interested in keeping him in prison. He was by then a forgotten man, but he himself had forgotten nothing. The hatred that had been a part of him all those years was a wicked thing when he was allowed to walk through the prison gate a free man. One thing had sustained him all that time—his desire for revenge, his resolve to kill Ben Drumgold.

It was not to be. The moment he stepped through the prison gate he found that he wasn't wholly a forgotten man. Ed Hodges, a deputy sheriff from Robles, was there to meet him. From Hodges Kincaid learned that he was not a free man but an ex-convict—and an ex-convict was never really free.

Hodges took him to Robles by stagecoach, and to the sheriff's office where Sheriff Mitch Worden—a Drumgold man, body and soul—warned him not to make trouble for anybody. Meaning, of course, Ben Drumgold. Worden gave Kincaid a choice. He could get out of

Colorado, or take a job with the stage line at the Lost Squaw Canyon station. He took the job, a job the Devil himself wouldn't have wanted, since it would permit him to be in reach of the man he intended to kill.

That was six months ago, and in that time his hatred for Drumgold had not left him. He'd seen the man once in that time. Three weeks ago Drumgold had been aboard an eastbound stagecoach, on a trip to Denver. He'd been here at the station for half an hour, eating a meal, talking in his blustery way, and laughing as though there were nothing on his conscience. He'd ignored Kincaid. He'd acted as though they had never before seen each other. And Kinclaid had let him reboard the stagecoach and go his way.

Why?

KINCAID stood there on the gallery of the station house now, three weeks later, and tried to understand why he hadn't taken his revenge. It had been because the only way to kill Ben Drumgold was in cold blood, and he could not bring himself to do murder. In a country where nearly every man went armed, Drumgold carried no gun. It was something he bragged about, a thing for which he was famous.

In New Mexico, it was the notorious John Chisum who went unarmed. In Texas, it was the rascally Shanghai Pierce. Here in Colorado it was Ben Drumgold. And, like the other two, he went his arrogant way in the midst of his enemies, and remained alive because he did not go armed. Few men would shoot down an unarmed man, even when eaten up by hatred.

Today, within a matter of minutes, if Chris Dolan's information was accurate, Kincaid would again come face to face with Drumgold. And what then, he asked himself, and had no answer.

As for Nora, he'd learned from Sheriff Worden that she'd gone out of Drumgold's life after a short time, as she'd gone out of his, for yet another man. No one knew where she'd gone, and it was, for Kincaid, as though she were dead. He did not hate her; he no longer felt anything for her.

He did not blame her, for her only fault had been her weakness, her restlessness. Ben Drumgold had played upon that weakness. If Drumgold had let her alone, had not coveted her, she might in time have settled down to being the woman he, Kincaid, had wanted her to be. So the blame was Drumgold's entirely. And so, Kincaid told himself, the man should pay with his life for the wrong done him—and Nora.

East through the canyon rose the racket of the stagecoach, rousing him from his reverie. He eased the hammers of the shotgun off cocked position, and leaned the weapon against the adobe wall. The rig was in sight now, the horses running hard.

He moved to the center of the yard and called to Injun Charlie, "All right, bring the team out here."

Minutes later the stagecoach came racing in, faster than usual, swinging in through the gateway at a careening, reckless pace and then hauling up to such an abrupt halt that the four blowing, lathered horses were set back on their haunches. The instant the wheels braked to a stop, the right side door swung open and a passenger dropped from the coach. It was Ben Drummond.

Excitement roiling in him, Drummond called sharply, "Lend a hand here!"

By now Kincaid was aware that something was wrong. Old Hank Weaver, the driver, was alone on the box; his shotgun messenger was missing. Kincaid stopped by the near front wheel, looking up.

"What happened, Hank?"

"Utes," Weaver said. "They got my gun guard, Ed Harnish. They shot him off the box." He wiped sweat and dust from his whiskery face, using a red bandanna. "They plugged one of the passengers. For a little while I figured we were all goners. And we've got women aboard."

"Where'd they jump you?"

"Outside the canyon."

"How many?"

"About twenty."

Drumgold called again, more demandingly, "Lend a hand here!" This time he added, "There's a hurt man inside. Help me with him before he bleeds to death."

Kincaid went to the open door and looked inside. There were five passengers besides Drumgold, one lying in an awkwardly twisted

position on the floor. The wounded man's shirt was wet with blood, and he appeared to be unconscious. Kincaid knew him. It was Dan Macklin, another big cattleman like Drumgold, from down around Robles.

Kincaid reached in, took Macklin under the shoulders, and half lifted, half dragged him from the coach. Drumgold took the man's legs, and the two of them carried him across the yard and into the house. Once inside, Kincaid called to the Ute woman.

"Hot water, Sarah, and the bottle of carbolic," he told her. "And something for bandages."

They took Macklin to one of the three small back rooms, the one that was Kincaid's own room, and laid him upon the bed. He groaned, opened his eyes, and asked, "Ben, how bad is it?"

"Not too bad, Dan," Drumgold said. "There's a slug through your shoulder. It could have been a lot worse. Take it easy."

"Give it to me straight, Ben," Macklin said. "If I'm a goner, I have to know it. I have affairs to put straight."

"You have nothing to worry about," Drumgold said. He looked at Kincaid. "Hurry that squaw up, will you?"

He removed his hat and coat and threw them aside. He unbuttoned his vest and rolled up his shirt sleeves. He was a coarsely handsome man of about forty-five, a dusting of gray at his temples and in his neatly-trimmed mustache. His suit was of brown broadcloth, his vest of a flowered pattern; he had a vain streak that kept him always well-tailored and freshly barbered.

He was as tall as Kincaid, and half again as thick through the body. He had that air of arrogance which was characteristic of a cattle baron. Kincaid could not but compare Drumgold's concern for Macklin with Drumgold's treatment of him seven years ago. Kincaid realized that these two were of the same breed, and that big-outfit men always sided each other, but still the situation fanned the flames of his hatred for Drumgold.

HE TURNED to leave, not so much to hurry Sarah as to get away from the man's presence. He was halted in the doorway by Drumgold's sharp, "Kincaid." He faced about and stared wordlessly at the cattleman.

"One of the passengers is a Miss Worden," Drumgold said. "She's badly upset by what happened. Look after her until I'm through here." He paused, then added, without looking directly at Kincaid, "The lady is my fiancee."

"Your what?"

"My fiancee, the woman I'm going to marry."

"You're marrying somebody?" Kincaid said. "I thought you just stole other men's wives."

Drumgold's face hardened. "Kincaid, I want to trouble with you," he said. "I never took a woman who didn't come to me willingly. If I ever took another man's woman, it was only after he'd left her in the lurch, one way or another."

"Like after he got framed into the pen, maybe?"

"Framed? You weren't framed, man."

"What would you call it, Ben?"

"Look, I'm not going to argue with you. Get that squaw in here."

Kincaid eyed him in a speculative way. "So you're going to marry this one? That's interesting, Ben, mighty interesting. Sure, I'll get the squaw in here."

He went to hurry Sarah, and to see in what way Durmgold's latest woman was so special that the man planned to make her his wife.

Hank Weaver was down off the box and leaning against the left front wheel of the stagecoach, a brooding look about him. Kincaid guessed that the old man was mourning his lost shotgun messenger, Ed Harnish. Injun Charlie stood midway between stagecoach and barn, holding the fresh relay of horses and staring at the four people grouped at the side of the coach.

There was a sneer on Injun Charlie's dark face. Behind the sneer, Kincaid knew, was a hatred born of envy. Injun Charlie lived in a private hell, tormented by his being neither white man nor Indian.

There were two women and two men in the group, and Kincaid paused on the gallery to look them over. He rolled and lit a cigarette while at it. The two men were obviously tenderfeet, one young and the other middle-aged. One of the women was very young, a chippy.

She wore paint and powder and her hair was bleached to a brassy brightness. Her hat had too many artificial flowers and her dress was too low cut and form fitting. She must be a dancehall girl, maybe even a parlor-house girl. Ben Drumgold might have an affair with her sort, but she was not the kind he would marry.

The other one was different, a lady. She too was blonde, but naturally so; her hair was the color of ripe wheat. Her appearance was subdued, her clothing fashionable and in good taste. She was not so young as the chippy; she must be in her late twenties, Kincaid judged. She was rather tall. Her features were cameo-perfect and her complexion flawless. She was the sort a man like Ben Drumgold would choose when, at long last, he decided to marry.

Kincaid found himself thinking, through her you could hurt him.

She must have felt his gaze, for she turned and looked directly at him. Something about him touched off curiosity in her, for her eyes widened and she examined him critically for a long moment. There was excitement and perhaps fright in the people with her; they were still discussing the Indian attack in loud voices, all talking at once. But she appeared quite calm. If she'd been upset, as Drumgold thought, she now had herself under control.

She continued to regard Kincaid in a thoughtful manner, seemingly a little puzzled by him. Then she started in his direction. By the time she reached him, he knew what Drumgold saw in her. She was an extremely desirable woman, one a man would cherish rather than take and soon forget. There was depth to her, and intelligence and character. It was more than seven years since Kincaid had known any sort of woman and now, because of this one, the blood coursed more swiftly in his veins.

She said, "Is Mr. Macklin dangerously hurt?"

"He's not so bad off as he thinks."

"But he should have a doctor, surely."

"He should, but he won't have, until he gets to Robles."

"It's a long way. Can he stand the trip?"

"He'll have to stand it."

She frowned, not liking his blunt, unfeeling tone. "You're not very sympathetic."

"My being sympathetic wouldn't help him. You're Miss Worden?"

"Yes, I'm Viginia Worden," she said, a coolness in her voice. "And you?"

"Kincaid's my name, Walt Kincaid."

"May I ask a question, Mr. Kincaid?"

He shrugged, "I don't see why not."

She regarded him frowningly for a moment, then asked, "Why were you scowling at me a moment ago?"

"Was I doing that?"

"You were," she said. "Does something about me displease you?"

"Displease me? On the contrary, Miss Worden. What I see about you pleases me very much, as it would any man."

"Still, you scowled."

"I was thinking of someone else, I suppose."

"Ben Drumgold, perhaps?"

He said curiously, "Now, why would you think that?"

"I saw how you looked at him when you came to help with Mr. Macklin."

"And how was that?"

"With hatred, I think."

He scowled again, then said, "Some times it's better not to pry, Miss Worden."

TURNING abruptly from her, he crossed to the stagecoach.

He said to Hank Weaver, "You'll be going on, won't you?"

"I've got a schedule," Weaver told him. "Indians or no Indians, I've got to try to stay on it."

"You'll run into more trouble down-canyon."

"More Utes?"

"Road agents," Kincaid said. "They're after some money Drumgold is supposed to be carrying."

He was interrupted by a scream from the other woman passenger, the girl with the brassy hair and gaudy clothes. She and the two tenderfeet still stood by the coach, on the opposite side from Kincaid and Weaver. She screamed again as Kincaid started around the double-hitch of horses, and now one of the men cried out in alarm.

As he came past the team, Kincaid saw that the girl and the two men were staring in fright toward the gateway. Two Indians sat their

ponies just outside, one an old man and the other a boy of twelve or thirteen. The one tenderfoot, the younger of the two, now jerked a revolver from inside his coat and levelled it at the Indians.

Kincaid shouted, "Don't shoot!" and leapt toward the man with the gun. He was an instant too late. The shot blasted, and the old Ute, shot squarely between the eyes, toppled from his pony.

The boy stared at the old man—his grandfather, Kincaid knew—with incredulous eyes, then looked back at the man with the gun. The tenderfoot was now drawing a bead on the youngster, but Kincaid was close enough to knock his arm upward as the revolver went off.

The tenderfoot whirled, wild-eyed. He burst out, "What's the idea?" and swung his gun like a club.

Kincaid ducked the blow, slammed against the man's legs, and bowled him over backward. Then he straightened, kicked the weapon from the tenderfoot's hand, and picked it up. The tenderfoot lay dazed for a moment, then slowly rose. The wildness was gone from his eyes and he stared at Kincaid with bewilderment.

"What ails you?" he demanded. "Are you crazy?"

"I'm wondering the same thing about you, friend," Kincaid said. "I told you not to fire that shot."

"Those Indians—"

"A harmless old man and a skinny kid."

"Harmless? I was in this stagecoach when those savages attacked it!"

Kincaid said, "Not those two," and tried to check his anger. He glanced at the gateway. The old man lay there, grotesque in death. The boy was gone, running his pony west along the road. Kincaid shook his head sadly. "Now there'll be hell to pay," he said, and scowled at the tenderfoot. "Friend, you're just too damn quick on the trigger."

"Now, listen, mister—"

"You listen," Kincaid said. "Those two came here once a week or so for a handout of grub and tobacco. I never turned them down, and because of that the Utes left this place alone. But not now. Not any more will they leave it alone!"

"How could I know that?" the tenderfoot asked, his face turned sulky. He was of medium height, slight of build, still boyish looking—a youth barely past his majority. "How was I to know there weren't a half hundred more somewhere out there?"

"You couldn't know," Kincaid said. "But I told you not to shoot."

"I didn't hear you."

"Are you hard of hearing?"

"No, but—"

Kincaid looked at the other tenderfoot, a pudgy man in his middle forties who was almost certainly a drummer. "What's your name?"

"Parsons, Bert Parsons. I'm from St. Louis."

"Did you hear me tell him not to shoot?"

"Well—yes."

Kincaid glanced at the girl. "Did you?"

She hesitated, looking uneasily at the young man. She said to him, "I'm sorry, Mr. Forsythe, but I did hear him yell at you."

Kincaid said, "Forsythe, eh? Well, Forsythe, everybody but you heard me." He held up the revolver. "You're real handy with a gun—a little too handy. How come?"

"When I learn to use a tool or a weapon, I learn to use it well," Forsythe said defiantly. "That's part of my training. I'm a mining engineer."

"Are you, now?"

"Do you doubt my word?"

"I don't know—yet. I just wonder about any man who's that handy with a gun."

Forsythe flushed. "So I'm handy with a gun," he said. "But that doesn't make me a gunman. I'm what I claim, and I'm on my way to take a job with the Faraday Mining Company at Robles. Mr. Drumgold has an interest in that firm, and he can vouch for me. He'll tell you I'm no gunman."

Virginia Worden had joined them and had taken in most of this. "He's telling the truth, Kincaid," she said. "Why don't you stop badgering him? After all, you know why he didn't hear you call to him."

He faced her. "I know?"

Her eyes held dislike of him. "I think you do. I think you merely want him to say why he didn't hear. You'd take it as a sort of confession, and that would give you some sort of satisfaction. Isn't that right?"

"Miss Worden, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't you?" she said. "You were quite callous in the way you answered my questions about Mr. Macklin's condition. You were rude to me a few minutes ago, practically telling me I should mind my own business. Now you want to humiliate this young man. For some reason you have a grudge against—well, all of us. Or is it against the whole world, Kincaid?"

She turned to Forsythe. "It's nothing to be ashamed of," she told him. "All of us who were on the stagecoach when it was attacked felt that way, and still do. Why not let this man win his point by telling him why you didn't hear him call to you?"

KINCAID said, "Never mind. I understand now. He was scared, so scared he couldn't hear. An old man and a small boy scared him that bad." He threw the revolver to the ground at Forsythe's feet. "Keep that out of sight so long as you're here," he said. "If I catch you with it in your hand again, I'll ram it down your throat."

He turned toward the gateway, and there stared down at the dead Ute. After a time he called to Injun Charlie, "Bring a rope."

When the half-breed came, they lifted the body onto the scrawny spotted pony and secured it with the rope. The pony was reined with a rawhide *bosal,* and Kincaid tied it back. He led the animal away from the gate, turned it west, and started it moving at a trot with a yell and a slap across the rump. The kid would find it, he knew.

He turned back to Injun Charlie. "There's trouble ahead for sure, Charlie."

"Yeah, bad trouble. Maybe there's one way to head it off, though."

"How's that?"

There was a wicked gleam in Injun Charlie's blue eyes. "Give the Utes the man who killed him," he said.

The others were inside the house now, at the table. Kincaid, with Injun Charlie's help, got the fresh team hitched to the stagecoach. They worked in silence; they seldom talked, these two. The half-breed was a man who lived tight within himself, and Kincaid was habitually lost in tormented thoughts.

Drumgold stepped from the house, still in his shirt sleeves. He said, in his curt way, "I want a word with you, Kincaid."

He came part way across the yard, halting then to light a cigar. He was frowning, looking bad-tempered. They had no friendly ground upon which to meet. They faced each other, Kincaid reflected, like a couple of hostile dogs.

He said, "Well, have your word," his tone not even close to being civil.

Drumgold said, "You have a chip on your shoulder, Kincaid."

"Do you expect me to hold my hat in my hand and say 'sir' to you?"

"I'm talking about your treatment of the others."

"Maybe I should have pinned a medal on that Forsythe."

"He lost his head, seeing those Indians."

"And one of them is dead."

"A savage," Drumgold said. "He hardly matters."

"A human being," Kincaid said, "and he matters to the kid who was with him and, yes, to me. I knew him, and he looked on me as a friend. But he matters in another way. The Utes will want to avenge his death, and I'm the one who'll have to face them, not that tenderfoot."

"Well, it was a mistake, and there's no correcting it," Drumgold said, and so dismissed the dead Ute from his mind. "Aside from being rough with young Forsythe, you had words with Miss Worden. That I can't overlook."

"She complained about me, did she?"

"No. I heard it from the other woman."

"I'll apologize to Miss Worden, if that's what you want."

"Never mind that. Just keep away from her."

"Are you scared I'll tell her what you are, Ben?"

"The lady is aware that there were other women in my life."

"Does she know that you framed a man into prison to get his wife?"

Drumgold swore. "Your wife came to me after you were sent to prison," he said. "After she divorced you. That much I admit. But I deny having anything to do with your being

framed—if you were framed. Look elsewhere for a man to blame that on. Look to the man who bought your ranch after the bank foreclosed on it."

"Matthew Adams bought my ranch," Kincaid said. "He's an old man with a reputation for being a square shooter. You can't pass the buck like that, not when Crescent cattle—your cattle—were used in the frame-up."

"By using Crescent, Adams made the frame-up all the tighter," Drumgold said, "and kept you from suspecting him. If there was a frame-up, which I doubt. Or if there was and Adams didn't rig it, then look among your enemies for the guilty man—or among the rustler crowd. It could be that one of them saw a way to throw suspicion off himself by getting you charged with rustling."

Kincaid stared at him, marveling at the man's gall.

Drumgold puffed on his cigar for a moment, then said, "Anyway, it's over and done with. It doesn't concern me one way or another. Your ex-wife left me, just as she left you. She left me for a whisky drummer, and she probably left him for somebody else. No doubt she's lived with a dozen men since you last saw her." He should have taken the rocky look on Kincaid's face as a warning signal. Instead, he went on, "Why don't you forget her, man? Why brood about a woman who has no more morals than—"

Kincaid hit him, striking out in blind fury. The blow caught Drumgold on the jaw, knocked the cigar from his mouth, and rocked his head back. He swayed off balance for several seconds; then his knees buckled and dropped him to the ground. Still raging, Kincaid bent over him, got a two-handed grip on his vest, and hauled him to his feet.

"Ben, you made her what she is!" he shouted. "I ought to kill you!"

OLD Hank Weaver came running, and caught hold of his arm. "Quit it, Walt," he said. "Don't be a damn fool, man!"

There was fury in Kincaid still. He threw Drumgold from him, rolling him in the dirt. Someone came hurrying from the house, and he was only vaguely aware that it was Virginia Worden. She stopped short, for now Drumgold was picking himself up.

"Ben, what happened?"

"Nothing. Go back inside."

"It isn't nothing," she said. "What's this man done to you?"

Drumgold shook his head. "Go back inside, Virginia," he said. "It's nothing, I tell you."

The fury was suddenly spent, and Kincaid said, "Let her stay. You have nothing to worry about. I won't lay a hand on you again, and I won't embarrass you by talking out of turn."

Virginia turned toward him, watching him as though he were a madman. But she spoke to Drumgold. "What have you done to make him hate you like this?"

Drumgold shook his head again, this time saying nothing. He looked dazed from the roughing-up he'd been given.

Kincaid said, "He's right, it's nothing. You don't need to be afraid for him any more. I'm done with him." He realized that it was so. This was the extent of his settling matters with the man. He wouldn't have his revenge; it wasn't in him to kill in cold blood. He added, "Yes, I'm done with him," and started to turn away.

He faced about when Drumgold spoke his name. He saw in the man's eyes a reflection of a hatred as bitter as his own. Until now he'd been unimportant to Ben Drumgold, but through having been manhandled the rancher too had learned to hate.

"What now?" Kincaid demanded.

Drumgold said flatly, "You told Hank about some road agents."

"That's right, I did. They're waiting down-canyon. They're after some money they think you're carrying."

"How do you know about this?"

"They were here."

Drumgold eyed him with quick suspicion. "And told you their plans?"

"Just that," Kincaid said. "They wanted me in on it, so they could pull the holdup here at the station, where it would be easy. One of them is Chris Dolan. He figured I'd go for it because I have a grudge against you. As far as you're concerned, I'd let them have you. But I don't want to see Hank here get shot off the box, or the other passengers endangered. So you're warned, Drumgold."

Hank Weaver said sourly, "Bronco Utes and road agents, and me with a schedule." He looked at Drumgold. "Do we pull out or not?"

"It's to risky, Hank."

"Are you carrying a lot of money?"

Drumgold nodded. "Thirty thousand dollars. But I'm not concerned about the money. I'd let the road agent have it, if I were sure no one aboard the stage would be harmed. But we can't be sure of that. This Dolan is a bad actor."

Kincaid couldn't help but say, "What's wrong? Does he want your life as well as your money?"

"He's made threats against my life, I admit," Drumgold said. "But if he stops the stage, the other passengers too will be in danger. There's no telling how far a man like Dolan will go when aroused."

"Or the men with him," Kincaid said. "His partners are Lew Thorpe and Sanchez, a couple of real bad hombres."

"So what do we do?" Weaver asked. "Just squat here?"

Kincaid shrugged. "Don't ask me. It's for you and your passengers to decide."

Weaver looked at the cattleman. "What do you say, Mr. Drumgold?"

Drumgold said, "All I can see is for you to take the stage through alone and send help out from Robles."

"He'd never make it to Robles," Kincaid said. "When those three hardcases discover he's driving an empty coach, they'll kill him out of pure cussedness."

Virginia had been a silent but interested witness to the discussion. Now she said worriedly, "Is there no other way?" There seemed to be no lessening of her dislike for Kincaid, but it was to him she spoke. "There must be something that can be done."

"There's this," he said. "You people can wait here, Hank included. There's an eastbound stage through tomorrow, and we can tell the driver to send help out from Dalton. It will take three days for the stage to reach Dalton and for a posse to get out here. By then, Dolan and his partners will realize that their scheme has misfired, and will have cleared out.

"The trouble with that is, the Utes may show up in the meantime, to avenge the old man's killing." He shook his head, showing his uncertainty. "It's a decision you people will have to make on your own. I don't want to have to make it for you."

"There's a way," Drumgold said suddenly. He'd gotten over the roughing-up Kincaid had given him, and his tone was again curt and his manner arrogant. "Kincaid, I want a rider sent to Robles, or better still to Fort Sands. We should have the cavalry out here, rather than just a sheriff's posse."

"Who do you figure that rider should be?"

"Well, what about the half-breed?"

"And have him shot off his horse by those hardcases? They'll know where he's going the second they spot him."

"I'll make it worth his while to run that risk."

"I doubt if you have money enough," Kincaid said. "That breed is nobody's fool. Still, you can put it up to him."

He turned to call Injun Charlie over from the stagecoach, but at that moment gunfire racketed nearby and he knew that neither the half-breed nor anyone else would be riding to Fort Sands for help, not for any amount of money Ben Drumgold might offer. He shouted to Injun Charlie, then crossed the yard at a run to grab his shotgun from the gallery of the house. The gunfire continued, much closer now.

WITH the shotgun, Kincaid turned back across the yard, but paused to tell Injun Charlie, "Get rifles and cartridges from my room. Arm Drumgold and the others." He saw that Drumgold, Virginia, and Hank Weaver were still where he'd left them, and called to the cattleman, "Get her inside, man!" He went on, intending to close the gate. He could hear yelling now, the war cries of Indians.

Three riders came around the base of the jutting cliff at a gallop. It was Chris Dolan and his companions. They'd lost their pack animal, and now Sanchez's mount was faltering. Behind them appeared a small band of Indians, screaming and shooting.

Sanchez's horse must have taken a Ute bullet, for it suddenly went down. Sanchez threw himself clear of the animal, but fell to his hands and knees. The other two reined

their horses about, Dolan firing at the Indians with his Winchester, while Thorpe raced back to the fallen man. Dolan's fire caused the Utes to pull up short in a confused milling.

Sanchez was on his feet now, and Thorpe quickly took him up onto his mount. With Sanchez behind him, Thorpe raced along the road. Dolan continued to fire until his rifle was empty. With their quarry close to the stage station, the Utes contented themselves with shouting a few taunts. Then they turned back along the road. Kincaid closed the gate as soon as the three road agents were inside the enclosure.

The gate was of heavy plank, in two sections, and could be barred with a stout timber. It would not stop a determined attack by a large number of hostiles, since it was, like the wall, only five feet high. But it completed the enclosure and would slow an assault. Once the bar was in place, he covered the three outlaws with his shotgun. Dolan sat his blowing sorrel over by the stagecoach. He was feeding fresh cartridges into his rifle. Thorpe had his revolver in his hand. And Sanchez, dropping from Thorpe's horse, placed his hand on his holstered gun.

Kincaid said, "If you're staying, you're giving up your guns."

Thorpe said, "Nothing doing, Kincaid."

Sanchez drew his Colt. Dolan said, "Easy, boys, easy. We're in a box."

He nodded toward the house, at the four men watching from the gallery. Hank Weaver was armed with his six-shooter, Ben Drumgold and the two tenderfeet, Forsythe and Parsons, held rifles. Also covering the road agents with a rifle was Injun Charlie.

Dolan said, "We have no choice," and dropped his rifle to the ground. He threw down his revolver a moment later. He was calm enough, and grinned at Kincaid. "You're the boss here, friend. We'll do as you say." He gestured at his companions. "Shuck your irons, boys."

Thorpe and Sanchez reluctantly obeyed, and Injun Charlie, at a sign from Kincaid, came and gathered up the outlaws' weapons. He went off to the house with them. Dolan dismounted and came to face Kincaid. The wild streak was strong in Chris Dolan, but he had a disarming charm to go with it.

"That's no way to treat men who almost lost their scalps," he said. "You act as if we're not to be trusted, Walt."

"You're quite a joker, Chris."

"We were minding our own business when those Utes jumped us," Dolan said. "We were riding through the canyon on our way to Robles, bothering nobody."

Drumgold and Weaver came and stood listening.

Kincaid said, "I can't prove otherwise, eh, Chris?"

"That's right," Dolan said, grinning. "It's your word against mine. And who's going to take yours, you being a jailbird?"

Drumgold said, "You're in a jam, Dolan, and you can't talk your way out of it." He looked at Kincaid. "Do you have some place where we can lock them up?"

"The harness room," Kincaid said. "Chris, let's go."

Dolan's grin faded. "Look, there's no need to lock us up now that we've given up our guns. We can't pull anything. Would we want to, with the Utes out there? Besides, you'll need us if they raid this place—and need us bad."

"There's that many of them?"

"There's a whole blamed village—men, women, kids, horses, and dogs."

"Camped in the canyon?"

"Sure," Dolan said. "By now they are, anyway."

He explained that the Indians had been headed toward Lost Squaw Canyon when he and his companions first saw them, early in the afternoon. After the three had visited the station, they'd gone into hiding—into camp, he termed it—about a mile west, through the gorge.

They'd been watching for the stagecoach, Kincaid knew. Instead, they'd seen two Indians—an old man and a boy—ride past. Later the boy had returned, with the old man's pony and the old man tied across its back.

He'd disappeared, but soon after a band of a dozen armed braves had come along. Dolan had figured it for a war party, and he and Thorpe and Sanchez had decided to clear out. They'd no sooner ridden out of the their hideout in some rocks than the Utes came after them, yelling and shooting.

"The Indians were peaceful enough when we first saw them," Dolan said. "Something turned them hostile. That old buck was killed here, eh?"

Kincaid noddd.

"That explains it," Dolan said. "They want to spill white blood to square accounts. Who was the crazy fool that killed the old coot?"

"One of the stage passengers," Kincaid said. "A tenderfoot."

"They'll be here for him—for all of us," Dolan said. "You're going to need Lew and Sanchez and me, all right. It's be loco to lock us up."

"If we need you, we'll turn you loose," Kincaid told him. "Head for the barn, Chris, with your partners."

THE harness room was windowless and no larger than a prison cell. The door was flimsy, however, and had no lock. To secure it, Kincaid piled a half-dozen hundred-pound sacks of grain against it. Since the door swung outward, there was small chance that the hardcases could move so much weight and break out.

Coming from the barn, Kincaid saw that the sun was already down. He'd lost all awareness of time since the arrival of the stagecoach, and the day had slipped away. But daylight came late and went early, here in the Lost Squaw, due to the canyon's steep walls. Dusk would come shortly, and nightfall too soon.

Darkness would be no guarantee against attack. The Utes were different from most Indians; they would fight at night. Indeed, they preferred fighting in the darkness. They were by nature a bushwhacking tribe.

The stagecoach team must be unhitched, Kincaid told himself. And the outlaws' two horses should be off-saddled and put up in the barn. If an attack came, he did not want the yard full of fear-crazed horses.

Hank Weaver and young Forsythe stood guard at the gate. Ben Drumgold and the man from St. Louis, Bert Parsons, stood by the stagecoach. Drumgold had a pair of saddlebags slung over his left shoulder. He and Parsons were untying the cords that secured the leather apron of the Concord's luggage boot.

Kincaid eyed the saddlebags, which Drumgold must have retrieved from inside the coach a minute ago. Cattlemen had a habit of transporting gold and silver specie in saddlebags, and Kincaid supposed that this pair held Drumgold's thirty thousand dollars.

He thought bitterly, thirty thousand. He earned seventy dollars a month, and to Drumgold thirty thousand was no doubt the profit on a single deal. Envy? No, it wasn't that he felt. Money meant nothing to him. Ten times thirty thousand wouldn't pay him for the past seven years, nor would it get him back his ranch and his wife.

Still, he resented Drumgold's having so much money. There was a man with no scruples, and all the luck in the world. And the best part of that luck, it seemed to Kincaid, was inside the station house—in the person of Virginia Worden. She was far more than Drumgold deserved.

The two men had gotten the apron untied, and each lifted a couple of pieces of luggage from the boot. Drumgold was taking the woman's bags inside, of course. He would fetch and carry for her, but would he, Kincaid wondered, be able to live up to her high opinion of him? Sooner or later she would certainly see him for what he was.

But that would hurt her, not the man. Ben Drumgold was thick-skinned. Once he possessed Virginia Worden, her opinion of him would hardly matter. So Kincaid's murky thoughts ran as he watched the two men carry the luggage into the house. They made another trip, carrying a trunk between them this time.

And then there was a wild shout from Hank Weaver. "Injuns, Kincaid. Injuns!"

There were seven of them. They came slowly, holding their ponies to a walk. They held their rifles with the stocks resting against their naked thighs, the muzzles pointed skyward. Four halted a short distance from the jutting cliff elbow. Two reined in midway to the station. One came on to within fifty feet of the gate, and there sat his mount in an impassive, prideful manner. He was wolf-lean, his ribs showing through his coppery skin.

Kincaid said, "Forsythe, keep your finger off the trigger." He lifted the timber that barred the gate and swung one section open. Then he said, "All right, Charlie."

Injun Charlie rolled his eyes at Kincaid, then wiped the palms of his hands on his shirt,

shrugged, and stepped outside. He went unarmed, going directly to the nearest warrior. There was some talk between them in the tribal tongue, the Ute emphasizing his words with gestures. The parley lasted perhaps five minutes. Then Injun Charlie started back toward the gate. He was wiping his palms again.

Kincaid closed the gate after the half-breed came in. "Do they want what I think, Charlie?"

"You know how crazy Indians are."

"Tell them 'nothing doing.' "

"Better think it over, Walt."

"Charlie, I can't do it," Kincaid said. "You know that."

Ben Drumgold said, "Well, what do they want?"

Injun Charlie looked at him with contempt, as though the cattleman were a half-wit. He turned back to Kincaid. "It's the easy way out," he said. "Give them what they want and they won't bother the rest of us. They don't blame you. The boy told it straight. He told them how you kept the tenderfoot from killing him. Give in to them, and they'll not bother the station. You'd better think it over."

"What do those savages want" Drumgold demanded.

Kincaid said, "They want the man who killed the old buck. If we don't hand him over, they'll try to take him."

"Those seven?" Drumgold said. "Why, man, we can pick them off and—"

"No shooting," Kincaid said. "This is only a delegation. There are more of them, a lot more, back through the canyon."

"This one," Injun Charlie said, "claims they'll kill everybody here unless you hand over the killer. He says they won't even spare the man who gives away food and tobacco—meaning you, Walt. You think it over good, eh?"

KINCAID looked at the others. Forsythe's boyish face was blanched, and beaded with sweat. He looked sick; he gazed at Kincaid like a beggar. Drumgold frowned; there was a calculating gleam in his eyes. Hank Weaver stared unfeelingly at Forsythe, his jaws working on a tobacco cud. The pudgy city man, Parsons, looked from one to the other of them in uncertainty and unease. Injun Charlie waited, his gaze going from one to the other. He seemed wickedly amused, somehow. Kincaid waited, but no one seemed willing to express an opinion.

Forsythe suddenly blurted out, "You wouldn't?"

"We'll see," Kincaid said. "Charlie, tell the Ute we'll hold a council to decide what to do. Tell him to come back in the morning and we'll give him our decision."

The half-breed said, "They won't wait," but he went out to face the Ute again.

He'd spoken but a few words when the Indian brust into an angry harangue. Injun Charlie began backing away. The Ute finally pointed to the canyon's south rim with his rifle, then kicked his pony into motion, wheeled it about, and galloped back the way he'd come. The other Indians fell in behind him, and soon all seven were gone from sight.

The half-breed came in, and Kincaid closed and barred the gate again. "They'll give you until the moon shows," Injun Charlie said, and pointed to the canyon's rim as the Ute had done. "They'll be back when you can see the moon from here."

"How long have we got, Charlie?"

"An hour, maybe."

"All right. Get the horses out of the yard, then stand watch here." Kincaid turned to the others—Drumgold, Weaver, Parsons, Forsythe. Four frightened men, he thought. "You know how much time we have," he told them. "We'll have a war on our hands unless you decide otherwise."

"Shucks, Walt," Hank Weaver said, "you wouldn't give Forsythe to them, would you?"

Kincaid said, "I have only one vote," and turned away.

He crossed to the house, where the two women watched from the doorway. He ignored their questioning gazes and went inside, going to his room at the back. The man in his bed was asleep or unconscious, and did not rouse.

Kincaid returned the shotgun to the rack on the wall, then took down the last Winchester there. From a cupboard he took two boxes of cartridges, and then returned to the main room. Sarah had lit the lamp there and, the people off the stagecoach having eaten, was now clearing the table. He caught her inquiring glance and shook his head.

"No supper, Sarah," he told her. "Just a cup of coffee."

She went to the fireplace at the far end of the room, then returned and set a tin cup filled to the brim on the table. She moved away without a word. She never had anything to say to him. She understood when he spoke to her, but she never made any reply. She and Injun Charlie conversed only in the Ute language. He did not know, even after six months, whether or not the woman could speak a word of English.

Watching her moving busily about the kitchen end of the room as he broke open one of the boxes and filled his pocket with cartridges, Kincaid for the first time wondered about her. Somehow she'd come to be the half-breed's woman. Perhaps Injun Charlie had bought her.

There was no telling if she were happy or unhappy about the arrangement; her dark face never mirrored any emotion. Maybe in the privacy of their room she was different. But here, in the main room, in his presence, she revealed nothing of herself. She was no more to be noticed than a shadow.

She was all right to have around the place. She was young, and not unattractive in the calico dresses she wore. She was clean in her habits. She cooked white man's grub well enough. She and Injun Charlie had been at the station for several years, and though two company agents had been killed in that time, Sarah and her man had not been molested.

Kincaid wondered if it would be different now, should the Utes attack and take the place. He wondered, too, in a vague sort of way, what Sarah thought of this trouble with her people, and if the woman had hatred for the whites, himself included. They made an odd threesome, he with his bitterness for the past, Injun Charlie with his torment over being a half-breed, and Sarah transplanted from the primitive life of her people to this place that was an outpost of the white man's civilization.

Civilization? Kincaid sneered at the word. It was represented by a man who would shoot down an unarmed and harmless old Indian. By another man who would rig fake evidence to send a neighbor to prison, so that he could have that neighbor's wife. By three men who would plan an armed robbery. And by a man —Kincaid himself—who had lived seven years with the thought of revenge. Thou shalt not kill, steal, covet thy neighbor's wife. Vengeance is Mine, sayeth the Lord. Kincaid wondered which were the more barbaric, Sarah's people or his own.

He was drinking the coffee when Virginia Worden came into the house. She hesitated a moment just inside the doorway, then came to face him from the opposite side of the long plank table.

"The others are discussing you," she said. "They're saying that you want to give John Forsythe up to the Indians."

"They're taking a lot for granted, Miss Worden."

She didn't seem to hear that. "You can't do it," she said. "It would be—well, inhuman. It's as Lily Marvin says—he's hardly more than a boy, for all his trying to act like a man. Lily says that he—"

"Lily," Kincaid cut in. "She knows all about men, does she?"

"She seems to be a sensible person."

"If she's that, she knows I don't want to give Forsythe to the Utes."

"Well, she did say to me that you wouldn't do it."

He smiled thinly. "She knows men, all right, that Lily."

VIRGINIA flushed. "I'd rather not discuss whether or not she has a knowledge of men," she said. "Why, if you don't intend to do such a thing, did you let the others believe you do?"

"I told them I have but one vote," he said. "I'm leaving it up to the majority to decide. It should be their decision, and yours. The lives of everyone here are in danger, grave danger. Have you considered that?"

"It's not something a person can quite grasp, the realization that his or her life is in danger."

"You were on that stagecoach when the Utes jumped it."

"Well, yes."

"And frightened?"

"Badly frightened."

"That's how it will be again," he said, "only much worse."

"But have we no hope? Isn't there a chance for us?"

"Only if we hand Forsythe over to the Indians," he said.

He emptied his cup, set it down, and took out makings. Lily Marvin came hurrying into the house while he was rolling his cigarette, a wildly excited look about her. She swept around the table to face him.

"Look, Kincaid," she said, "you're not letting them do it, are you?"

"Have they decided to hand him over?"

"They will!"

"Well, it's for the majority to decide."

He lit the cigarette, looking at her wonderingly. She was young, certainly no older than Forsythe; but she had lived a long, long time. With her bleached hair and gaudy dress, she looked out of place here in Lost Squaw Canyon. She would look out of place anywhere but in a dancehall or a parlor house. He could imagine her having been the wife of half a town, somewhere. But here she was, upset about young John Forsythe, who probably wasn't half the man that the others had been back where she'd come from.

She said, "That half-breed is telling them it's our only chance. That fat drummer is so scared he's saying we have to save ourselves. The stage driver tells the others that Forsythe is to blame. And Drumgold claims they have to consider us women. They'll do it, Kincaid!"

Virginia said, "No, not Ben."

Lily looked at her. "I'm sorry, honey, but your man thinks it should be done. Maybe he's thinking only of you and me."

Virginia cut in, "No, Ben wouldn't do such a thing!"

She didn't seem too sure of it, however, and Kincaid sensed that she was beginning to wonder and perhaps have her doubts about Drumgold. That this should happen did not displease him. He was that vindicative; he had that much human weakness. He would like this woman to see Ben Drumgold for what he really was.

He picked up his rifle and the boxes of cartridges. "We'll not give Forsythe to the Indians," he said. "We'll fight, and maybe we can stand them off." He went to the doorway, then added, "There's an empty back room. When the attack comes, you two stay in there. Maybe you'd better move your luggage in and try to make the room comfortable. There's no furniture, but—well, you'll have to make out. At least no stray bullets will reach you there."

He turned to go, but Lily said, "Kincaid."

He looked at her. "Yes, Lily?"

She smiled. "Thanks."

He gave her one of his miserly smiles in return. "Don't thank me until this is all over," he said. and went out.

It was hazy dusk. He looked toward the canyon's south rim. The moon was not yet in sight. Injun Charlie had cleared the yard of horses and now stood over by the barn with Drumgold, Parsons and old Hank Weaver. Kincaid crossed to them, and handed the full box of cartridges around so each could take a share. They all stared at him.

Drumgold said, "This means you intend to fight, doesn't it?"

He nodded. "It does."

"You'd better reconsider," Drumgold said. "It's the lives of all of us against Forsythe's. And there are the women. We can't let them fall into the hands of a bunch of savages."

"There are nine of us, counting the three hardcases we have locked up," Kincaid said. "We're well armed and we have good cover. If we hurt the Utes bad enough, they'll call it quits—maybe. And we'd better hurt them bad enough. We'll fight. I give the orders here."

"The majority—" Drumgold began.

"You have no majority," Kincaid cut in. "Forsythe, the two women, and I are against it. That makes four votes to four. You go help the women move their luggage into the back room." He looked at the others. "You three get over to the wall and keep watch."

He turned away, and crossed to Forsythe, who stood by the gate. The youth turned toward him, his face a pale mask in the fading light. Kincaid gave him the second box of cartridges.

"Kincaid—"

"Quite worrying."

"They want to give me up to the Indians."

"They'll fight, instead," Kincaid told him. "Take it easy."

NIGHTFALL crept into Lost Squaw Canyon. Kincaid peered steadily into the darknes of the canyon. his rifle resting

atop the adobe wall. The others were shadowy figures along the wall, all but Drumgold. He was slow in returning from helping the women with their luggage. Kincaid thought about that, uneasiness building up in him.

He moved to where Forsythe stood. "There's trouble," he said. "Back me up. Get over to the stagecoach and keep watch."

Forsythe started to ask questions, then thought better of it. He left the wall. Kincaid saw that Injun Charlie was to the left of the gate. Parsons was to the right of it, with Weaver beyond him. They seemed intent only upon watching for trouble outside the station.

Kincaid headed toward the barn, passing Forsythe at the stagecoach in the middle of the yard. A moment later, as though suddenly wary, he swerved toward the roofed and stone-buttressed well. It would serve him for cover, if need be. That moment a man came from the barn. It was, as Kincaid had expected, Ben Drumgold.

Drumgold looked furtively about. Then, apparently not noticing Kincaid by the well and Forsythe at the stagecoach, he strode toward the front wall. Now another shadowy figure came from the barn, followed a moment later by two more. There was no surprise in Kincaid. He'd guessed that Drumgold's failure to appear at the wall meant that the man was making a deal with the three hardcases—and freeing them. The trio halted just outside the barn, peering about. They were armed. Drumgold had given them their guns.

Kincaid crouched behind the circular well wall and levelled his rifle. He called, "Chris, you're beaded. Don't try anything."

Dolan cursed bitterly.

Kincaid said, "Drop your guns, the three of you!"

"No, damn you!"

From the stagecoach, Forsythe said, "Do as you're told. Why get yourself killed?"

There was a whispered discussion among the three. Then Thorpe and Sanchez moved back into the barn. Dolan turned around.

"Be sensible, Walt," he said. "Do you want a massacre here?"

"I'll take my chances with the Utes at the moment, Chris."

"You'd better come to your senses, like Drumgold did."

"Drop your guns," Kincaid said. "I'm not arguing with you."

Dolan swore, then abruptly whirled and darted into the barn. Thorpe and Sanchez swung the double door shut, closing the three of them inside. Kincaid joined Forsythe at the stagecoach.

"Good enough," he said. "That door is the only way out of there, and if they try to come out, open up on them. Are you as good with a rifle as with a hand gun?"

"Yes."

"Plug them in the legs."

"All right."

"Once we've given our decision to the Utes, we'll let those three out," Kincaid said. "We'll need them then."

He returned to the wall, seeing Drumgold and Injun Charlie together by the gate. The half-breed backed away, but Drumgold stood his ground and levelled his rifle.

Kincaid said, "There are two reasons why you won't pull that trigger, Ben. One is you know you're going to need me to side you against the Utes—and against those hardcases, later on. The other is that you realize your woman would guess why you shot me, and would hold it against you."

"Kincaid, I'm thinking of her—only of her."

"Knowing you, I doubt that. You're thinking of your own hide. But no matter. We're not handing Forsythe over to the Utes to be tortured. We'll take our chances."

He broke off, sensing a change in Drumgold's manner. He leapt forward and knocked the barrel of the man's rifle upward an instant before it went off. He drove on, slamming into Drumgold and wrenching the rifle from his hands. Drumgold slumped there, staring at him with hatred.

Drumgold said, "Kincaid, if we get out of this alive, I'll make you wish you'd never been born!"

Kincaid made no reply, but there was a yell from Hank Weaver. "Here they come!"

A drumming of hoofs heralded the return of the Utes. The moon was just beginning to show above the canyon's rim. There were seven again, and they came at a gallop until they were within a hundred feet of the station. Six halted then in a line, abreast, and the

seventh came on and reined in close to the gate. He and his pony were now daubed with war paint. This time he carried a lance instead of a rifle.

Kincaid called to Injun Charlie, "Tell him we can't give them what they want. Tell him too that a lot of his people will die if they force us to fight."

Injun Charlie talked to the Ute from inside the gate. There was a short, angry reply from the Indian. Then his arm whipped up and forward and the lance hurtled through the air. Injun Charlie jumped backward, startled, but the lance was aimed at the gate. Its point embedded itself in the wood, the shaft vibrating with an angry humming. The Ute swung his pony about and raced away, the others following him and uttering wild yells.

Kincaid looked at the half-breed. "Well, what did he say?"

"What he said is one thing, what he meant another," Injun Charlie said. "He told me they'd come back and kill us all when the new sun rises. They won't wait that long."

KINCAID saw that the moon was just clear of the canyon's rim. It was smudged over by clouds, and there were few stars. It promised to be a black night.

He said, "Watch the rocks, Charlie. Some of them will creep in there. From now on shoot anything that moves."

He went to Hank Weaver and gave him the same instructions. The stage driver had only his revolver, there not being rifles enough to go around, and Kincaid promised to get the shotgun for him.

Weaver said, "I have a real bad feeing about this, Walt."

"If you hurt them enough, we have a chance."

The old man stared at him. "You're a cool customer," he said. "Don't you ever spook?"

Kincaid had no answer for that. He went to Bert Parsons. The man from St. Louis was a short, thick shape in the darkness. There was a smell of whisky about him. Kincaid told him to shoot at anything that moved outside, not only mounted figures.

"Have you ever been in a fight?" he asked.

"No," Parsons said. "And I wish I wasn't in this one."

"Take it easy," Kincaid said. Moving away, he heard the man mutter an angry comment to that.

He sought Drumgold next, and found him still slumped against the wall. Giving him back his rifle, Kincaid could feel the cattleman's hatred.

"We're in for it now," he said. "If you want to try to use a gun on me again, you'd better wait until we're out of this mess. Right now we need each other. There's a ladder at the side of the barn. You get up on the barn roof and see that the Utes don't sneak up to the side of the station. Tell Forsythe to get on the roof of the house. He can watch the other side."

Drumgold stared at him sullenly, then moved away. Kincaid watched him talk to Forsythe over at the stagecoach. Then he crossed to the barn and kicked on the door. He called to Dolan. Then, getting an answer from inside, he said, "Chris, the Utes will attack any minute now. You three come out and lend a hand."

Dolan cursed him, and shouted, "Do your own fighting. We're staying right where we are!"

"It's your fight too, whether you like it or not. If the Utes get inside the wall, you three will be goners along with the rest of us."

"No tricks, Kincaid?"

"No tricks, Chris."

"We're not letting you take our guns."

"You keep your guns. You'll need them."

"All right," Dolan said. "We'll come out."

Kincaid backed off toward the well, holding his rifle ready as the door swung open. Dolan came first, followed by Thorpe. Those two were armed with both rifles and revolvers. Sanchez had only his revolver. They halted just outside the door, watching Kincaid.

"We'll have a bone to pick with you, if we get out of this alive," Dolan said. "And I figure on doing just that. No damn Utes are doing in Chris Dolan. And if they don't fix you, bucko, I sure will!"

"So now I know," Kincaid said. "You and Sanchez get over to the front wall with the others, and Thorpe can watch from the rear."

"Where will you be?"

"Up front with you."

"Just so I know," Dolan said.

He and Sanchez went off toward the front wall and Thorpe turned toward the rear of the yard. Watching them go, Kincaid had the feeling that he would be caught in a double-barreled trap even if the Utes were beaten off. He'd have to settle matters with the disgruntled outlaws on one hand, and the enraged Ben Drumgold on the other.

He went to the house to get the shotgun for Hank Weaver. The lamp still burned in the main room, but no one was there. He heard the two women talking in the room he'd given them; one was chattering away at a great rate, and he supposed that would be Lily Marvin. He went into his own room and got the shotgun and a box of shells for it. The man in the bed there stirred.

"Ben?"

"It's Kincaid, Macklin. How are you feeling?"

"Weak. Just weak."

"Well, take it easy."

"What's going on out there?"

"We're expecting trouble with the Utes," Kincaid said. "I'm hoping we can handle it."

He returned to the main room, laid his rifle, the shotgun and the box of shells on the table, and reached up to the hanging lamp. He was about to extinguish its flame when the door to the women's room opened. Over his shoulder, he saw Virginia Worden moving toward him.

He said, "We'd better have it dark in here," and blew out the lamp's flame. He picked up the guns and shells and moved toward the doorway.

VIRGINIA said, "Kincaid," and came to him through the darkness. She stood very close, so close that it seemed he could feel her presence. He waited, but she seemed to have nothing to say to him, after all.

"Don't worry too much," he said. "There's a chance that we can hold them off."

"I'm trying not to be frightened."

"Well, it's never easy."

"Not even for you?"

"I'll be scared along with everybody else," he said. "Maybe it'd be easier for you if I sent your man to you."

"My man?" she said oddly.

"Well, Ben. Do you want him with you for a little while?"

"Just let me stand here with you a moment," she said, "to draw strength from you. You don't mind?"

He was held silent by surprise for a moment, then said, "Mind? Hardly. But I had the idea that the farther I stayed from you the better you'd like it."

She smiled. "You do get a person's dander up," she said. "And I've never before known anyone so full of hatred and so hard. But I suppose a person learns to hate only for good reason. And right now I wish I had some of your hardness. How does a person become hardened enough to go through something like this, Kincaid?"

He had the thought of what seven years of prison and the loss of a wife and a ranch did to a man, but he merely said, "It's a hard country, and a person has to be hard to survive in it. You're from the East?"

"Yes. From Philadelphia."

"You're a long way from home."

"And in more ways than one," she said, quick to understand his meaning. "A great distance, and a great difference. But it's not home any more. My parents are dead. My father passed away only five months ago, and I came west to live with my brother in Denver."

"And so got to know Ben Drumgold."

She was silent a moment, then said, in an altered tone, "To know him? I wonder about that. I met him only three weeks ago." She seemed to be thinking aloud rather than talking to Kincaid. "He swept me off my feet, I suppose, and—well, does anyone know another person in three weeks, Kincaid?"

He thought of Nora. He'd met her in Denver, and in less than three weeks he'd taken her for his wife. He said, "Maybe not even in three years. But life is a constant gamble, and marriage is, too. Some win, some lose. If a person waits until he's sure he could wait too long."

"That's true, I suppose," she said. "Tell me, have you known Ben a long time?"

"Yes, a long time."

"The hatred is back in your voice. It wouldn't be proper for me to ask why you hate him, would it?"

"You could ask him."

"I have. He won't discuss you—at least not with me."

"I'm not important to him," Kincaid said. He moved a little away from her, finding himself too sharply conscious of her nearness, and finding too that he had an impulse to touch her. "I'd better get out there."

"Yes. But, Kincaid—"

"Yes, Miss Worden?"

"Be careful."

He said, "All right," and left her, disturbed by the sense of intimacy that had been between them.

Virginia watched his tall, lean figure grow indistinct in the darkness, realizing with a sense of shock that she was emotionally upset. For a moment she'd felt very close to him—closer than she'd ever felt to any other person. During that moment he'd not seemed a stranger at all.

It was as though she'd penetrated the hard shell of him and found a capacity for tenderness within the real man. And she'd sensed that his hatred came of great hurt, and so was not the ugly thing she'd imagined. For the space of a heartbeat or two, she'd wanted him to hold her in his arms—and not merely because she was frightened.

She was shocked at herself, for she was a virtuous young woman. She wondered how she could be engaged to marry one man and want to be in another man's arms. All she could think was that she was not in love with Ben Drumgold, that Ben had, with his whirlwind courtship, merely deceived her into believing that she was.

Certainly she had come to have her doubts about this man she was to marry. She'd come to know him since their arrival at this lonely stage station, to know him as he really was. Suddenly, Virginia had the disturbing thought that perhaps she was only now beginning to know herself.

She turned from the doorway and felt her way through the inky darkness to the back room. There she shocked herself to an even greater degree by speaking of her new-found doubts to Lily Marvin. She confided in the girl, she realized, because Lily did know so much more about men than she. It jarred her to learn that Lily had a low opinion of Ben Drumgold and a high one of Walt Kincaid.

It was Lily who finally suggested that she ask the wounded man, Mr. Macklin, about the man she was to marry and the other one who upset her emotionally.

"He can tell you about them," the girl said. "He seems to know your fiance pretty well. Maybe he knows Kincaid too. At any rate, he'll be able to tell you why Kincaid hates Drumgold. You go ask him, honey."

Virginia said, "Oh, I couldn't do that." The next moment the things troubling her seemed unimportant, for the quiet was shattered by the bloodcurdling war cries of the Indians, and by the crash of guns.

THEY came at a gallop, two dozen or more. Most hung at the off side of their mounts, firing from under the ponies' necks and making of themselves the most difficult of targets. The leaders of the band were directly in front of the station by the time Kincaid brought his Winchester into action. Prepared though he'd been for the attack, it still took him by surprise and rattled him. So it was with the other men along the wall. All were slow to open fire.

Kincaid missed his first shot, and his second. As he jacked a third cartridge into the rifle's chamber, he saw the shadowy shape of a Ute spill from his pony—shot by someone else. With his third try, he chose an Indian who rode and fired from an erect position. His aim was good this time. The warrior pitched from the back of his running mount.

They were past the station then, and he drove his fourth shot at their backs, hitting nothing. Now from the rocks beyond the road came a hail of bullets and arrows, revealing that other Indians had, under cover of darkness, gained positions there without being seen by the station's defenders.

This was a more serious threat, and Kincaid fired at the muzzle flashes among the rocks until his rifle was empty. Crouching behind the wall, he fumbled fresh loads into the Winchester. He heard above the din a man's agaonized scream. An instant later he saw old Hank Weaver reel away from the wall and sprawl on the ground. He got his rifle back into action, but aim as he would at the flashes of the Ute guns, he wasted his shots.

The rocks gave the Indians perfect cover.

Soon after, the warriors hidden there quit firing, and the mounted ones came from the east in another wild charge. Kincaid and the others were ready this time, and fired directly into the band. Kincaid saw two braves topple from their mounts, saw another go down with his pony. He managed to drop still another as they raced past the station with their guns blazing.

Their wild charge had no sooner carried them past the station than their companions in the rocks took over again. An arrow struck the top of the wall almost directly in front of Kincaid.

He heard the whine of a slug that missed him by inches. And he heard a cry from the drummer.

"My God, I'm hit!"

He was once more reloading his rifle when the Indians abruptly stopped firing. A single shot from within the station cracked, then quiet closed in there too—a total quiet, but one charged with deadly danger.

Several minutes passed. Then somebody said, "Is it over?" It was Sanchez who asked the question, his voice barely more than a whisper, but sharp with anxiety.

Chris Dolan answered, "Over nothing!" He spoke, as he always did, jarringly loud. "It's only begun!"

(To be continued in the next issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Which was the first railroad to span the West all the way to the Pacific Coast? (Its building was dramatized in a movie.)

2. Window Rock, Ariz. is known as "the Indian capital," and Gallup, N. M. is an important trading point for what Indian Reservation?

3. What did old-time cowboys mean by a "boar's nest?"

4. Besides being hard to pronounce, what do all these words have in common: sahuaro, tornillo, ocotillo, vela del coyote, cholla, tuna, lengua de vaca, peyote, prickly pear, devil's head, viznaga, and tasajillo?

5. Were there telegraph offices at most stagecoach stations in the old West?

6. In what state are the following well-known mountain peaks: Long's Peak, Mount Elbert, Pike's Peak, the Spanish Peaks, Uncompahgre Peak, Redcloud Peak, Mt. Evans, Bison Mountain?

7. "On a little Texas pony he called Chaw" is a phrase from what cowboy ballad in which a boy named Joe gets killed in a stampede?

8. Who usually names the cowhorses in a ranch remuda?

9. Oldtime Mexican vaqueros used to wear *armitas* (arm-EE-tas) or *chigaderos* (chee-gah-DAY-ros), which American cowboys called "chinkaderos" or "chinks." What were they?

10. "Dewey" was one of the many nicknames for what Western weapon?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 113. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

The FUGITIVES

By TEDDY KELLER

SALLY'S WORLD WAS suddenly all topsy-turvy . . . and she would rather help a murderer than the lawman who was saving him from the mob

DARKNESS pushed across the sky from the east, cloaking the barren land, encircling the stagecoach station with gloom and loneliness. At a window, Sally Quillan stirred and turned to the long, rough room. She moved unhurriedly, a slender girl in tired gingham, her strong features bleak.

She lighted the lamp that hung over the round table where travelers ate, and lighted another one where two double-deck bunks stood in a corner. Opposite the bunks, she lighted a lamp over the two rope beds where, hidden by partitioning curtains, lady travelers took their rest.

Shivering against evening's first chill, she folded her arms over her chest. She moved then to the rear of the long room and lighted a lamp in the kitchen corner. She was firing up the stove when she heard the pound of hoofs outside.

Dropping the stove lid into place, she whirled to face the door. A heavy male voice

spoke briefly outside. Spurs jingled. She darted past the sink to snatch the big, graceful Peacemaker from the gunbelt which hung from a wooden peg. She reached the door a moment before the knock shook the solid timbers and echoed the length of the room.

The gun was steady, almost eager, in her hand. She thumbed the hammer back. "Who is it?" she asked.

The heavy voice answered her. "It's Deputy McCloud. Open up."

She stared at the solid door, at the gun in her hand.

"Open up." An urgency bit into the man's voice. "I haven't time to chin at you. Open up or I'll break the door down."

Her gun held steady. Reaching with her left hand, she slid the bolt, then stepped back. A boot crashed against the door. It flew back, banging against the wall. A big man stood silhouetted against the pale western sky. His shoulders dipped. The figure of a smaller man shot past her, lurching, stumbling, sprawling headlong to the floor.

The big man strode inside, lamplight gleaming on his badge, and slammed the door behind him. His black-eyed gaze noted the fallen man, then skipped about the room. When he saw the girl's gun he only grunted, his round heavy face impassive.

"Put the gun away," he said. "I'm Deputy McCloud."

Sally eased the hammer down, but didn't lower the gun. She said, "Would you mind explaining yourself?"

McCloud pushed past her, bent to the fallen man, and grasped his jumper. "On your feet," he said, hauling him upright.

Handcuffs shackled the man's wrists. Not as tall as McCloud, his slim body sagged with the pain that had drained color from his face. He was hatless. Tousled, sandy hair tumbled across his forehead. A smile lurked at the corners of his wide mouth and sparked behind his pale blue eyes.

"Sit over there," McCloud said, shoving the prisoner toward the round table. "And don't try anything." To Sally he said, "How about some grub?"

She didn't move. "I asked you to tell me what this was all about."

McCloud regarded her as though she were crazy. "There are vigilantes out there," he said. "This jasper's a killer. The constable in Willow Springs was afraid folks were going to string him up, so he telegraphed the sheriff over at Pawnee. The sheriff figured I could handle the vigilantes." His thick lips flattened into a mirthless smile. "I reckon those fools are out there in the dark chasing their tails."

He crossed to the table and sat facing the door, opposite his prisoner. "I told you to put up your gun," he said to Sally, "and fetch us some chow. The county'll pay for it."

Sally lowered the gun at last. Crossing to the kitchen, she felt the eyes of both men on her. She passed the peg and gunbelt and put the gun down on her work table, beside the stove.

She moved bean pot and coffeepot to the front of the stove. Putting biscuits into the oven, she added more flour to the sour-smelling starter. She sliced sow-belly into a skillet.

"What kind of a stage station is this?" McCloud said, twisting his head to look at her. "Where are your horses and your men? You don't run this shebang alone."

"Right now I do," Sally said. "There hasn't been a stage through here in four days. The men who hadn't left when the raids started quit after the last holdup."

McCloud grunted irritably. "Don't you have some fresh horses for us? The county'll pay for 'em."

"Indians ran off the last ones two nights ago," Sally said, wiping her floured hands on her apron. "Maybe the county can buy from them."

"That's not funny," McCloud said. "The nags we have are done in."

The prisoner was smiling. "I told you not to ride those horses into the ground," he said softly.

"You shut up," McCloud said. "If we don't find some horses, you might do a rope dance before breakfast."

The two men were silent then, each busy with his own thoughts. Sally worked at the stove, finally bending to peer into the oven. Straightening, she said, "Where did you lose the posse?"

"About five miles back," McCloud said. "But they'll be picking up our trail before long. That's why we have to keep moving."

He turned again, his gaze, bold and insulting, bringing color into Sally's face. "It sure is a shame," he added, "that we can't stay the night."

SALLY spun around to the stove. She stirred the beans, she turned the bacon. But over the sound of the sputtering skillet she could hear McCloud's chuckle. She glanced to the gun, then over her shoulder toward the table.

"Come on, woman," McCloud said. "I'm hungry."

She poured coffee and took up beans and sow-belly. Deliberately she served the prisoner first. He smiled at her, his eyes bright. She set butter before him and put a hot biscuit on his plate. Then she turned to the deputy.

"Snap it up," McCloud yelled. "We don't have all night."

When she had served him, Sally stood near the work table, near the gun, and nibbled at a biscuit. She watched the prisoner's awkward attempts to feed himself with manacled hands. He smiled as he took his first bite of biscuit, and winked brazenly at her. He was barely started when McCloud sopped up the last of the bean juice and shoved his plate at her.

"You eat a lot," she said.

"The county'll pay for it," he said. "Come on, hurry it up."

She took his plate, but first she gave the prisoner a fresh biscuit and refilled his coffee cup. She bustled around the kitchen for a full minute before she served McCloud.

He spooned beans into his mouth and said, "You're a hell of a woman—pussy-footing around this jasper, when he held up one of your stages and killed a driver."

Sally's hand darted to her mouth and she sucked in a quick breath. She stared at McCloud, her eyes widening, then at the prisoner. His smile was gone, but his mouth still twitched a little.

Sally said, "When did he do this?"

McCloud's mirthless smile gloated over the prisoner. He said, "It must have been that last robbery you were talking about—maybe four days back. He's the one who got the five thousand dollars and killed the old driver."

Sally's eyes bugged, and a little cry pinched up from her throat. She whirled back to face the stove and the work table. She saw the Peacemaker, and her hands clenched convulsively. She moved nearer the work table, then turned, her hands moving jerkily behind her.

McCloud shrugged and continued to shovel food into his mouth. The prisoner had paused, his coffee cup held between bound hands. He regarded her soberly.

"Now I know where I've seen him before," Sally said. Her hands closed on the gun behind her. "He was the only passenger on the stage that day. I didn't get a close look at him, but I'm sure. He kept back, distant-like—and all the time he was planning to rob and kill and—"

"He's a mean hombre," McCloud said.

Sally moved away from the work table then. Circling to the right of the men, she let the Peacemaker in her right hand hang hidden in the folds of her skirt. McCloud, sopping up his plate, paid no attention. The prisoner stared into his coffee cup.

Reaching the door, she jerked it open and faced the two men. "If he's the one who did it," she said, "the vigilantes should find him and finish their job."

Before either man could move, she turned, pointed the gun up into the darkness, and fired three shots.

His chair crashed back. A coffee cup clattered to the floor.

Like a great bull, he bellowed and rushed at her. She faced him, smiling, and held the gun toward him.

"I'm through with it now," she said.

"What do you think you're doing?" McCloud demanded, grabbing the gun. "What's the idea?"

She stared past McCloud to the prisoner, and her smile shriveled and died. "Sam Quillan was my father," she said.

"The old man driving the stage," McCloud said, "was your father?"

"That's right." Sally brushed past McCloud and moved toward the table. "And now the vigilantes are coming, and this dirty killer will pay for a good man's life."

The prisoner met her gaze steadily, evenly, as she passed the table. At the stove, she poured herself a cup of coffee. McCloud

shrugged finally, closed the door, and tossed Sally's gun to one of the corner bunks. He ambled to the table. Sitting, he stared for a long time at his plate. Finally he chuckled and looked at his prisoner.

"We could run," he said, "but the horses are shot. I'd rather get caught here than in the open. Maybe I can hold 'em off."

"Maybe you can't," Sally said.

"Maybe," McCloud said. "But doesn't it beat all? I got him away from a dozen vigilantes over at Willow Springs. And now some no-acount girl is bringing those boys and their rope right in on top of us."

"Don't sound so concerned about it," the prisoner said.

McCLOUD laughed. "I'm a lawman and I'm supposed to uphold the law. But that doesn't keep me from hating the guts of a drygulcher like you."

The prisoner met the lawman's gaze. A brittle silence boiled up between them and spread throughout the room, scratching at raw-edged nerves, plucking at taut tempers. Sally looked from one man to the other. At length it was McCloud's gaze that wavered, and Sally had to break the silence.

"My father," she said, staring at the prisoner, "never hurt anybody in his whole life."

The prisoner nodded. "He must have been a good man."

"How would you know?" Sally screamed. "How would you know a good man if you tripped over one? He was old and he was crippled up with an arrowhead in his leg and a bullet in his shoulder. He wasn't supposed to do anything but run the station. Then the raids started. Drivers and messengers were hurt and killed. Finally the last ones quit. Dad drove the stage because there was no one else to take it. And you killed him—you killed him! I hope they kill you."

Another coffee cup clanked to the floor and rolled over once. Sally started at it, where it lay at her feet. It was hers. Coffee had splattered her shoes and the hem of her dress.

"McCloud," the prisoner said, "if I'm going to die, I should at least know my admirer. You didn't introduce us."

"Didn't catch her first name," McCloud said.

"I'm Sally Quillan."

The prisoner dipped his head.

The window shattered. A bullet ricocheted off the stove top. McCloud rolled off his chair, pulling his gun. The prisoner lurched up and futilely banged his handcuffs on the table. Sally darted around the room blowing out lamps. Abruptly the station was dark except for the red that glowed through the stove's grates. A voice rang out of the darkness.

"McCloud, we know you're in there, and we know you have that killer. Bring him out."

The deputy pulled himself up to the broken window and shouted, "I'm not surrendering no prisoner. You come and get us."

"Don't be a fool, McCloud. We have the place surrounded. You haven't a chance."

For answer, McCloud snapped a shot through the window. But no shots came back. The voice called again.

"McCloud, Miss Quillan, come on out. McCloud, at least get the girl out of there. We don't want to hurt her."

Sally crossed to the window. "I'm staying," she cried. "This man killed my father. I'll leave here when he's dead or you're ready to string him up."

"Miss Sally," another voice yelled, "don't be loco."

Turning from the window, Sally faced the prisoner, his figure limned by the glowing stove. For a moment she regarded him quietly. Then she moved to the wall, took down her father's gunbelt, and buckled it around her waist. Crossing to the bunk, she retrieved the gun. Her gaze never left the prisoner's face as she ejected the three empty cartridges and reloaded. When she had finished she moved to the table.

"If they don't get you," she said evenly, "I will."

Out in the night, guns roared. For one instant the room was filled with the deadly song of bullets, which smashed glass, ricocheted off the stove and knocked over a chair.

Sally sat on the floor. The prisoner had dived under the table. He peered across to her in helpless appeal. McCloud, on his knees, reached his gun to the window and fired. A bullet gouged chips from the window sill. He snatched his hand down.

"Those boys aren't fooling," he said, pivot-

ing. To Sally he added, "You might think of letting them in. Just try. If you open that door they'll think it's our guest, here, making a break. You'll die."

He glanced around the room, then pointed to a shotgun racked beside the door. "Got any shells for that?" he asked.

"It's loaded," Sally said. "There're more shells in the chest underneath."

A bullet thunked into the logs of the far wall. McCloud, crouched low, ran to the door and snatched down the shotgun. He filled his pockets from the wooden chest.

"They'll figure to soften us up, and then rush us," he said, checking the gun's loads. "This'll slow 'em down."

He dashed back to the window. Sally, keeping low, moved to the corner bunks. Watching the prisoner, she took out the Peacemaker and laid it in her lap. A bullet rattled the door. Another ripped the lid from the coffeepot.

And then there was nothing for her to do but sit and watch and wait. McCloud held his position, occasionally throwing unaimed shots into the night. The prisoner hunched under the table. Now and then he tried to grin, but he winced at each shot that hit near him. Sally watched him, and when he looked at her she dusted ready fingers over the gun. And all the while bullets tore at the door and through the window, smashing and ripping and splintering the walls, the rough furnishings, the pots and pans, and the stove.

ABRUPTLY McCloud stood and triggered two shots into the darkness. Hunkering down again, he reloaded his sixshooter, the shotgun propped beside him.

"It might go easier on you," he said, "if you'd tell us what you did with the the loot."

The prisoner laughed. Shoving to a sitting position beneath the table, he lopped his manacled wrists over his knees. A bullet flung a coffee cup from the table above his head.

"Wouldn't that be nice?" he asked. "Five thousand, wasn't it? Man, I could find lots of ways to use it. That's a pile of money."

Sally snatched up her gun and levelled it at him. "Is that all you can think about? You killed my father, and all it means to you is five thousand dollars. I don't know why I didn't kill you when I first recognized you."

"Hey," McCloud said, "put down that gun. There's enough lead flying without you shooting things up in here."

The prisoner laughed again. "Where's all this lead? I don't even hear any shooting."

"They quit," McCloud said. Standing, he peered out the window. "It's too quiet. They must be getting ready to rush us."

Almost immediately, a fusilade exploded outside. Again bullets raked through the station. Glass and wood splinters showered in a fine mist. McCloud holstered his revolver and shoved the barrels of the shotgun through the window. The roar shook the room and tore at Sally's ears.

McCloud took a quick look. "That stopped 'em," he said.

"Not for long," the prisoner said. "Next they'll try to burn us out."

"Burn us out?" Sally cried, jumping up from the bunk. She glanced around fearfully. "If they set fire to the station, they'll kill us all when we run out."

"Maybe not," McCloud said. He hunkered down again and broke open the shotgun. "The light'll be good. They should recognize the one they want."

The prisoner crawled from under the table then. Standing, he peered around him. The light from low-burning fire in the stove showed the fear in his eyes.

"That's as it should be," Sally said. "He should die."

McCloud laughed and propped the loaded shotgun beside him. "The way you hate this jasper, I figured you'd have plugged him before now. I would have, if he'd left my father the way he did yours."

"What do you mean?" Sally asked, tensing.

McCloud said, "Didn't he scalp your father to make it look as if Injuns killed him? Didn't he dump your father in the road where the team'd trample his body?"

Sally brought her gun up again. For a long moment she gazed at McCloud. Then she said to the prisoner, "You started to introduce yourself. What's your name?"

"Bell, Hank Bell."

"Hank Bell?" She stared at him, the gun lowering. Then her gaze swung to McCloud and the gun came up again.

"Yes, sir," Bell said quickly, "folks'll be

looking for that stolen money for a long time." He frowned at Sally and shook his head. As McCloud turned away from the window, Bell said, "Suppose you had held up the stage. Where would you have stashed the loot?"

"What are you getting at?" McCloud said warily.

A bullet creased the stovepipe, wobbling it, dumping soot onto the stove. McCloud crouched down below the window. Sporadic firing began outside.

"I'm just guessing," Bell said. "Everybody'll be guessing about that money. I thought maybe you'd have a good idea."

Sally glanced at Bell, then at McCloud. She said, "If anybody'd know the workings of a criminal mind, a lawman should."

"Yeah, that's right," McCloud said. He smiled with his own importance. "Well, if I'd stolen that money, I wouldn't have had much time to get rid of it. Let's see. There's kind of a cave in the rocks, just south of where the holdup was. It's rocky around there; horse wouldn't leave tracks. That's where I'd have stashed the loot."

"That sounds good," Bell said.

"Damned if it doesn't," McCloud said. "When we get you taken care of, I'm going to go there and have a look—unless you decide to talk."

He faced around to the wall. Reaching up, he shoved his gun through the window and fired three quick shots. A flurry of gunfire answered him. Grinning, he pivoted and began ejecting empty shells. Bell moved back to the table and sat facing McCloud and the window. He glanced at Sally and nodded.

Crouched low, she moved several paces away from her corner. She looked nervously to Bell. Then, halting, she leveled the gun on McCloud.

"Drop your gun right there and put your hands up," she said.

McCloud's head snapped up.

"I said drop it," Sally repeated, thumbing the hammer of the big Peacemaker.

"You're loco," McCloud said, half rising.

A bullet sang over his head. He dropped down again, spinning the Colt's cylinder, thumbing the hammer.

"Watch him," Bell shouted. He grabbed a coffee cup and threw it at McCloud.

THE cup whirled past McCloud's face. He jerked back. Before he could steady himself, Sally had advanced another step and aimed her gun at his thick nose.

"I'm telling you for the last time," she said. "Drop the gun."

McCloud's gun thumped to the floor. "You're loco," he said. "Are you siding with the man who killed your father?"

"I have a gun on the man who killed Dad," she said.

"You're crazy as a bedbug," McCloud said. "I'm no robber. I'm the deputy sheriff at Pawnee."

Bell stood to move away from the table, then hunched over as more shots poured through the window. He said, "You're a liar, a thief, and a killer. You held up the stage and you killed Sam Quillan."

"I didn't," McCloud said. "I'm a lawman."

"Which is just what I figured," Bell said. "It had to be a lawman or somebody close to things, who knew when those money shipments would come through—and somebody who could steer posses wrong."

McCloud put his back to the wall. "Who the hell are you?"

"He's Hank Bell," Sally said. "His brother was the first driver we lost. I wrote a letter to Hank and sent him Jimmy's things. But I didn't know who he was until just now. As I said, I didn't get a good look at him before."

"That's because I didn't want anybody to know who I was," Bell said. "I didn't trust the law or the stageline or anybody. But I was on Mr. Quillan's stage. When the shooting started, the horses lunged like runaways. I thought Mr. Quillan's been hit, so I started to try to help him.

"The door banged open and I was thrown into a ditch, apparently without the bandit's seeing me. If he had, surely he would have come back and finished me off. When I came to, I saw the stage up the road, and I started toward it. I heard horses behind me and, thinking the gang had seen me and doubled back to get me, I started to run. But I must have been unconscious longer than I thought, because it was the posse. Naturally, when I lit out, they figured I was guilty."

McCloud laughed without mirth. "How come you didn't tell the posse all this?"

"I came here to find the people who killed my brother," Bell said. "I figured the longer I stalled the more I was liable to learn. I knew that whoever killed Mr. Quillan would be afraid of me when they heard the posse had picked me up so close to the stage. They wouldn't know how much I knew or how much I might've seen. They'd have to contact me somehow—or try to kill me. It was worth a chance. And if I could turn up the loot, I'd have that much more proof. Now I know where to look."

McCloud growled out a curse. "You're guessing, both of you."

"We're not guessing," Sally said. "You robbed that stage too near here; I heard the shooting. I sent our last hostler to get the constable, and I rode over. Dad was dead when I got there. He'd been shot four times, scalped, and left under the horses. But he was tough. He dragged himself into the coach before he died.

"I put his hat on him to cover his head. That's how he was when the posse got there. That's how they took him back to town in the coach. The bullet wounds were enough to kill him. Only the undertaker and I knew that he'd been scalped—and the man who was there when it happened."

"You've outsmarted yourself," Bell said. "You should've stayed out of it and just let the vigilantes hang me."

McCloud cursed. "I thought you might know something. I figured if you was going to spill it, you'd do it when you thought you were about to die. I wanted to be sure the wrong people didn't hear what you had to say."

Bell glanced at Sally and laughed.

"Don't laugh too soon," McCloud said. "You aren't out of the woods by a damn sight. I didn't figure on needing and not being able to get extra horses, but it doesn't make any difference."

"It makes all the difference," Bell said. "You could've killed me any time after we got out of Willow Springs. You didn't have the guts to shoot an unarmed man, and you haven't the guts to kill a woman now."

McCloud snorted his derision. "I'll tell you why I didn't gun you. After the first holdups old Quillan wouldn't stop bothering the people in the sheriff's office. I had a hell of a time trying to quiet him down. Then he got to acting funny, as if he suspected me. I figured maybe he smelled something, and maybe he told the girl. So I had to stop here and check on her. If she acted okay, she was in the clear. If she didn't—well, it'd be easy to say you killed her trying to get loose, just before I dropped you. I didn't aim to hurt the girl unless I had to, but now—"

LIKE a great snake striking, he came at Sally. She had watched Bell too intently, and had let her gun sag. She snapped the gun up, but McCloud was upon her, his lunge flinging her back. The floor slammed at her. The gun was wrenched from her hand. McCloud's weight crushed her, then rolled clear.

She twisted away and saw him scrambling for the gun. Bell dived at him, beating at McCloud's head with the handcuffs. McCloud rolled. Bell tumbled off. McCloud seized the gun and rose to his knees.

"All right," he yelled. He cursed them loudly and violently. "Now you get over by that table, both of you."

Bell stood and helped Sally to her feet. He squeezed her hand between both of his as they reached the table. She trembled slightly. But they faced McCloud calmly.

"Now isn't that touching," McCloud sneered. "Just like in the story books. You can hold hands while you die."

"You haven't got the guts to kill us," Bell said.

McCloud laughed. "I don't have to. If you stand there long enough one of those slugs from outside'll get you."

"And you'll be in the clear," Sally said.

"Sure. I told the vigilantes to lay off. It's not my fault if they kill you along with the man they're after."

"You murderer," Sally said. "You filthy, sneaking murderer!"

McCloud laughed again, taunting her, and moved a step closer. "Sure I'm a murderer. I killed your father and shot up about a dozen drivers and guards. I have a set-up that can't miss. I have a man in the express office and one in the bank, and a driver on the run on the other side of Pawnee. Why, I even have another deputy. That damn fool sheriff does

not even know what's going on under his nose. He won't find that little cave. And we have fifty thousand dollars hidden there."

A bullet gouged the table behind Sally. Outside, two guns roared, and Bell winced, swayed, then tried to reach his manacled hands to his shoulder. A thin stream of blood coursed down his arm.

"They're getting close," McCloud said. He laughed a hard rasping laugh. "It won't be long."

A flurry of shots cut loose. For an instant the room was filled with screaming, ricocheting lead. There was sudden silence, then McCloud's gleeful laugh.

"Sounds as if they're going to rush again," Bell said.

The laugh drained from McCloud's face. A wildness glazed his eyes. "Then I can't wait," he said. "They aren't going to find you two alive when they get here."

"You're crazy," Bell said.

"I can't hang more'n once," McCloud said. "Move away from her, Bell. If they get in here before I'm done, nobody's going to believe your story unless she backs it up."

His eyes narrowed as he levelled the gun on Sally. A tremor passed through his arm. Sweat glistened on his forehead as he thumbed the hammer. A fusilade exploded outside. McCloud twitched. Involuntarily, he swiveled his head toward the window. In that instant Bell shoved Sally aside and lunged.

McCloud's head snapped forward, but already Bell was swinging his arms high and plunging them down. The handcuffs smashed at McCloud's wrist. McCloud cried out in pain and rage. His gun clattered to the floor. The momentum of Bell's charge sent both men reeling.

McCloud tripped and sprawled backward, Bell on top of him. Bell chopped at the beefy face. The handcuffs smashed skin and bone. Roaring, McCloud got his hands up and flung Bell aside. Sally darted for the gun. McCloud kicked it. The gun discharged and bounced, thumping, the length of the room.

Bell ducked his head and lunged at McCloud. The deputy straightened him with a knee, pounded fists into his face. Bell staggered back, trying to get his hands up. McCloud slammed a fist to Bell's stomach, to his head, to the wounded shoulder. Bell toppled back.

Sally turned and raced to the window. McCloud screamed at her. A bullet from outside whined past her. She flinched, tripped, sprawled beneath the window. Twisting, she saw McCloud lunging at her. Her hands groped for and found the shotgun. She swung it around and jerked at the triggers.

The kick pitched her back. The roar filled the room like a living thing that tore again and again at her ears. The flash and the smoke blinded her. Then deathly silence rushed in.

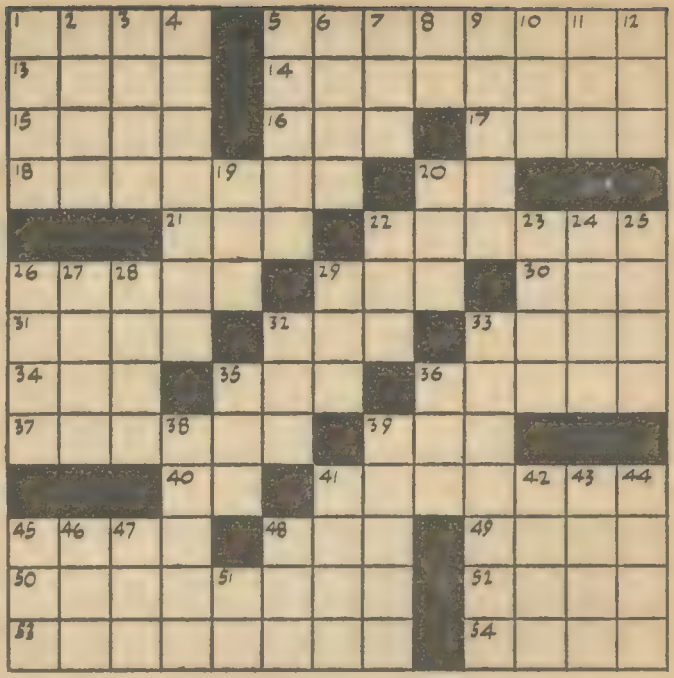
Somewhere a soft light came on. Bell came toward her, carrying a lamp. His face was puffed and bleeding, his step unsteady. He helped her up. She turned her head away from McCloud's torn body. Bell guided her to the table, slid a chair behind her, and put the lamp down.

Turning away, he hurried over to the stove. He found a towel and took it toward the door. He stood just beside the door and yanked it open. Shouts of surprise came from the darkness outside. Bell waved the the towel in the doorway. Then, hanging it on a bullet-splintered door jamb, he turned back to Sally.

She stood, then moved hesitantly to meet him. He raised his hands high as she came against him. The manacled wrists dropped behind her, binding her to him, shielding her from the world. Her arms went around him. Her head sagged on his shoulder and his cheek pressed against her hair.

The tears came then, pushing from under her tight-closed lids, rolling down her cheek, wetting his shoulder. She didn't even open her eyes when the first of the vigilantes rushed into the station.

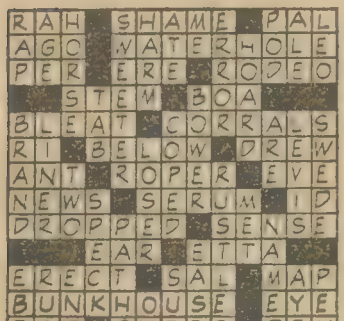
THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 White patch on horse's face
5 Panicky rush of cattle
13 Large bean
14 Officer below a sergeant
15 Common metal
16 To devour
17 Went lower
18 Opposite of ascend
20 The man
21 Sombrero
22 Cowboy's seat
26 Beef animal
29 24 hours
30 — Rogers, cowboy
31 Peas come in them
32 Overweight
33 To be spiritless
34 Half of two
35 Sweet potato
36 Lassoed
37 Not tough
39 Twice five
40 You and me
41 Half-wild horse
45 Chilled
48 The man's
49 Open surface
50 Unbranded calf
52 Brad or spike
53 Acts as chairman
54 Capable



Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

DOWN

1 Slipped
2 Rubber wheel hoop
3 — 'n' Andy
4 Western cattle farms
5 Smell
6 Froglike creature
7 Skill
8 Military Police (abbr.)
9 Sat for a picture
10 Historical period
11 Daniel's nickname
12 Large deer
19 Hearing organ
20 It's for horses
22 Occupied a seat
23 To let fall
24 To gallop easily
25 Watched
26 Discoloration
27 Musical sound
28 Biblical garden
29 River barrier
32 Distant
33 Western State
35 Word of assent
36 Reserve (abbr.)
38 Easterners out West
39 Elephants have them
41 Small rodents
42 Native of Arabia
43 Man's name
44 Strong wind
45 Little devil
46 Automobile
47 Miss Arden of TV
48 Concealed
51 Rhode Island (abbr.)

WOMAN ON HER OWN

THE FRONTIER WASN'T EASY, even for a no-nonsense girl like Kate . . . but she'd take no man's help till she had proved herself

IN THE spring of that year a prospector named Vinton uncovered the gold-bearing placer bars and ledges in Aspen Canyon, forty miles beyond the western rim of Solomon Valley; and hundreds of miners, riff-raff, gamblers and honky-tonk girls swarmed toward the diggings. Within a matter of days a long line of tents and cabins sprang up in the canyon, and they called the camp Vinton.

The Harrison & Holbrook Stage Lines extended their route from Coolmar across Solomon Valley and through the pass to the boom camp. They built their first relay station on Solomon Creek and put Sam Belknap in charge. Sam's daughter Kate kept house for him and cooked for the passengers. Kate was tall, blue-eyed, strong, and there was no nonsense in her. She wore her flaxen hair braided and coiled, and dressed in men's work clothes, for her father was sickly and she helped him with the heavier chores.

She could hitch a fresh team to the stage as well as a man, and think nothing of it. Nevertheless, she dreamed of silks and laces, of music and dancing, of a husband and children in a grand house. Deep within her stirred a fierce ambition to make her dreams come true.

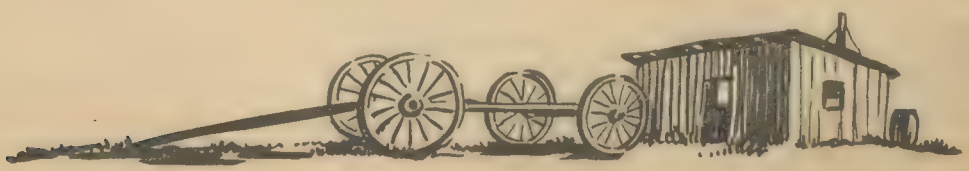
They arrived at their new home while the sun was shining. It was a land of rolling green hills, a place where people could flourish and thrive. Yet it was thinly populated, for cattle ruled the valley, and the ranchers dreaded the coming of settlers above all else.

Tom Waring's Chain outfit dominated the western reaches of the valley from Solomon Creek to the pass; and he was not pleased when the stage line built a station along his border. He was a lanky, brown-faced man, hard of fist and tough as leather; and it was well known that he had chased more than one family of nesters from land he considered his by right of usage. A week after the Belknaps took over the station, he paid them a visit. He looked over the newly-erected buildings, and then his gaze fastened on the garden plot Kate had spaded up near the creek. Finally he shifted in the saddle and glanced from Kate to Sam.

"I only wish you folks were squatters so I could send you packing. As it is, all I can say is you aren't welcome."

Sam allowed mildly that he was sorry Waring felt that way. "I don't see how we'll be a bother to you, though."

Waring indicated the plot of spaded earth. "Good grass turned under is a bother. As far as that goes, this whole place is a sorry bother.



Gad said curtly, "Do as you're told and you won't get hurt."

Next thing you know, someone'll come along, open a store, and make this a gathering place for all the shiftless rawhiders in the country."

Kate came to stand beside her father, her eyes blazing. "Is that all you have to say?"

"I can think of plenty more."

"So can I. In the first place, I mean to spade up a lot more of that ground and plant garden greens. And in the second place, we mean to open a store and sell whatever folks might need to keep them from driving twenty miles to Colmar."

Waring grinned faintly. "What folks are you referring to, the flotsam that's floating around Vinton?"

"I mean the farmers that'll eventually settle along this creek."

Tom Waring's eyes hardened. "There'll be no squarters breaking sod around here," he said.

"Don't sound so positive," Kate said. "I know your kind. You hog twice the grass and water you need, and you care nothing about the land."

By J. L. BOUMA

"I care enough not to want to see it cluttered up by a pack of fools, and plowed under," Waring said testily.

"Name calling comes easy to you. And it's so stupid."

Waring gave her a closer scrutiny, and a slow grin spread across his brown face. He said to Sam, "She's a regular hellcat, isn't she?"

Sam said uneasily, "She doesn't mean any harm, Mr. Waring."

"I meant every word I said, and then some," Kate snapped.

"Say what you like, for all the good it'll do you," Waring told her. "That boom at Vinton won't last. And once the gold peters out, and this stage line stops making money, they'll close it down."

"We'll stay regardless," Kate said flatly.

"That's easy enough to say."

"The Homestead Act covers this valley. We'll file and build. Then we'll have the law on our side."

Waring shook his head. "Us cattlemen elected the sheriff of this district, and he doesn't give a damn about a law they passed in Washington, or a piece of paper on file at the county seat."

"Then we'll go the nearest U.S. federal marshal for help," Kate said. "And if it comes to that, we'll fight you and your kind without the help of the law."

Waring gave her a short laugh. "Lord help the man who gets hitched to you," he said.

"You can bet he'll be a *man!*"

Waring said, "He'll have to be, if he expects to wear the pants." He looked deliberately at the way Kate filled her denim trousers before he rode away.

KATE kept her word. The following week two big freight wagons drove into the yard, and the teamsters unloaded boxes and bales of merchandise. When Sam saw all the goods Kate had bought, he said hesitantly. "It seems like a lot. Think it'll ever sell?"

"It's mostly staple merchandise," Kate said. "There's no reason why it shouldn't sell."

Sam looked over the kegs of nails, the wooden buckets and tubs, the strings of lanterns. There were sacks of salt, sugar, flour, of dried prunes, apples and apricots. And for the women there were buttons, thread, pins and needles, and bolts of calico.

Sam pursed his lips. "Well, I don't know. They've opened two stores at Vinton, so I'm hoping we don't get stuck with all this truck."

Kate said, "They're getting more for their goods than we'll be getting, too. Besides, that camp up there won't last." She looked at her father. "But we will."

Though the store was not a rousing success, Kate sold various items to the stage passengers during the days that followed, and she was sure that business would increase. It did. Two stages stopped daily, the Vinton-bound at around ten in the morning, the Colmar-bound in the late afternoon, and word spread that a person could get this or that at Kate's station.

One day a miner complained about the cost of work clothes in Vinton, so Kate bought a bale of hickory shirts and one of heavy trousers, and sold out within a month. She stocked more, but she didn't splurge. This was early in the summer, the crest of the boom had been reached, and no one knew how much longer it would last. At times Kate wondered what she would do if the camp ever closed down.

Her garden patch flourished. She made arrangements with one of the storekeepers at Vinton, and sent him crates of vegetables that he sold out an hour after he received them. She was up before dawn and it was usually midnight before she fell into an exhausted sleep. There was the housework, the cooking, the store, and her garden. Her father had all he could do to take care of the horses, and to keep the barn and the corrals clean. She was afraid even this was too much for him. She told him to rest. She was young, strong, capable of doing his work as well as her own.

Early one Saturday morning she hitched up her buckboard and drove to Colmar, her cloth handbag heavy with gold and silver coins. She settled her accounts and deposited the rest in the bank; and when she came out into the sunlight she was aware of a stronger pride than she had ever known.

She walked on looking in store windows; she stopped and saw her reflection in glass and scarcely recognized herself, a tall, hatless young woman in a calico dress, her sun-streaked hair drawn severely back to a knot, her face thinned down and burned dark as a man's. She passed chattering townswomen and smiled at them. It was so seldom she smiled!

She thought of all she was missing, the socials, the dances, the men callers, and for an instant felt a lurching sense of loneliness. It was not good for a woman to be alone so much. She felt the town wrap itself around her, and had the sudden urge to leave it behind.

The drunk who reeled through the batwings of the saloon meant no harm, but his shoulder struck her and threw her backward against an awning post. He said, "Lady, lady," and reached out in a dazed way as though to help her, his bleary eyes blinking against the bright sun.

Kate had stepped aside to go around him when another man came from the saloon, whirled the drunk around, and threw him bodily into the street's dust. Kate stiffened as she recognized Tom Waring.

She said, "That wasn't necessary. I can take care of myself."

"Maybe," said Waring. "But the fellow needed a dose of strong medicine to set him straight." She walked on and he fell in beside her. "You're tough, just like me, but I'll wager I get more fun out of life." He grinned at her, interest brightening his gaze. "You're not a bad-looking woman. Don't you ever get the hankering to play a little?"

Kate's face flamed. "Not with you," she snapped, and turned abruptly away from him.

But what he'd said preyed on her mind; his words deepened the sense of loneliness she had experienced a moment before. That night she studied her face carefully in the mirror—the brown skin, the stern eyes, and the mouth that seldom smiled. Then fear touched her; she was twenty-three, an old maid. Her hands were callused as a man's.

Then she thought of all she'd accomplished since moving here, and she took a deep breath and drenched the fear with the icy waters of common sense. Nothing came easy, and she had just started. The only thing to do was to keep working toward her goal, and hope that someday her man would come along. She was not afraid, she told herself.

She did not see Tom Waring again for two months. Then one day, when she was unloading a crate of merchandise, he rode up and came inside. He stood inside the door a moment and looked around, a tall, hard-face man, an she knew from the tigerish look that lurked in the corners of his eyes that something was wrong. She guessed what it was, for two days ago she had heard what he had done.

He said, "Where's your father?"

"In bed."

"In bed?"

"He's been ill," she answered coldly.

"Then who's doing all the work?" he demanded. "Don't you have a hired hand?"

"I do all the work," she said.

HE CAME forward and regarded her for a silent moment. Then he said abruptly, "I'm looking for a couple of men. One of 'em used to work for me. They and two others have been rustling my beef."

"I heard about it. The two others are dead. You and your men killed them."

"They were selling my beef to the miners," he said, annoyed. "We caught 'em red-handed. They ran and we chased 'em, and they started shooting and got the worst of it."

"Then your steers were worth more than the lives of those men," she said.

"You don't understand," he said. "They the same as took the bread out of my mouth. If they came here and robbed you, wouldn't you—" He broke off and shook his head. "No. You won't even try to understand, because I'm the one who's telling you."

"You want to kill those other two men; that's why you're looking for them. Well, even if I knew where they were I wouldn't tell you."

"I want them out of the country," he said patiently. "I stopped by because I thought they might have come here during the last day or two to stock up on supplies. They'd hardly take the chance of being seen in town."

She said nothing, and he scratched his jaw and grinned faintly. "I reckon you have to be a cattleman to feel as I do," he mused. "You have to start from scratch and build your outfit. You have to work night and day, the way you're doing here." The grin became a scowl. Then, in a sudden outburst, he added, "I'll bet you've lost ten pounds since I saw you last! What are you trying to do, kill yourself? Why don't you hire a man to do the heavy work, if your father can't handle it?"

"Why don't you mind your own business?"

His eyes flickered dangerously. "You're the damndest woman I've ever run into."

She was close to tears. "When we came here you wanted to run us out. We were strangers in the country, and you talked to us as if we were trash. Now we don't need your sudden interest, so get out. Get the hell out of here!"

He made a faint growling sound, then stepped in and took her. As she struck at him, he pinned her arms and kissed her brutally on the mouth. Then he released her and stepped back.

"That's what you need, and plenty more like it."

She wiped the back of her hand across her mouth and spat. Then she took a shotgun from behind the counter and said in a shaky voice, "If you're not out of here by the time I count—"

"I'm going," he interrupted quietly. His starching gaze was almost more than she could bear. "I reckon I'm sorry for what I did." He touched his hat. "Good day, miss." He walked outside.

She watched him ride away through blurred eyes. Then abruptly, something within her burst, and she pillowed her face in her arms. But almost at once she straightened slowly. She wouldn't cry. She'd be damned if she would cry. Wiping the tears angrily from her eyes, she put the shotgun away and went on with her work.

Summer passed in a blaze of heat, and then an early fall snapped in the air. Sam Belknap grew worse. He hardly left his bed now, and had long ago ceased doing any work. Kate looked in on him one afternoon and knew instantly that something had happened.

His head was turned oddly, and one arm extended stiffly from under the blankets. He was awake, but his eyes had a strange slant to them, and when he tried to speak all that came out was gibberish. Kate needed no one to tell her that he'd suffered a stroke.

She knew, then, what it was to be alone, and to have no one to turn to, no one at all. She did what she could for him, and when the stage pulled in she spoke to the driver.

He said, "I'm empty this trip, Kate. Do you want me to take him into town?"

"I want him here," Kate said. "But if you'll send the doctor, I'll be obliged."

It was dark by the time the doctor arrived. He made his examination and then called Kate aside. "There's really nothing I can do, Miss Belknap. I'm sorry, but you have an invalid on your hands. His entire right side is paralyzed, and from now on he'll have to be fed and tended like a baby."

"I can do it," Kate said.

The doctor looked at her. "Yes," he said gently, "I believe you can. But don't you think—"

"I'm going to keep him here. I'm going to take care of him." She knew what the doctor had meant to say, but she could not conceive of anyone else taking care of her father. He was her family, the only family she had. He belonged with her.

Tidwell, the superintendent, rode out the next day. "Kate," he said, "I'm sorry about Sam. But it can't be helped, and now we have to think about you. What are you plans now?"

"Why, I mean to stay here and run this station," Kate said.

"You've practically been running it single-handed the past two months. Now you'll have this extra burden. It's just too much, Kate."

"Then I'll hire someone to help me."

"It'll be hard to find a good man," Tidwell said. "The young bucks don't want any part of a stable job, with all the ranches hiring extra men for roundup. And most of the graybeards are more bother than they're worth." He thought a second. "Keep 'em rolling for a couple of days, Kate. I think I'll have a man here for you by then."

"Thanks, Mr. Tidwell."

"It might not be for long, anyhow. The boom isn't what it was, Kate. It'll be snowing up there by November, I think. If it's a tough winter, that camp'll close down tight as a drum, and we'll be pulling our stages off this road."

"I've considered that."

"I reckon you could get some work in town if we close down. You're pretty well known."

KATE took a deep breath. "If it comes to that, I mean to take out a homestead."

"During the winter?" Tidwell objected. "Do you know what you're saying? Why, you'd have to build a shelter, and you'd be snowbound out here. How would you get along?"

"Get a load of THAT pot!"

"I have my stock and a little money in the bank," Kate said. "We'll get along."

"Mmmmmm," Tidwell murmured. Then he added, "You could spend the winter here, I reckon. There wouldn't be any wages in it for you, but at least you'd have a place to live. Then if we open the route again next spring, you could just keep running the station."

"That's kind of you." Kate's voice trembled. "This place has come to seem like home."

"Stay here, then," Tidwell said gruffly. "Maybe in the end this *will* be your home, Kate. I don't see why not. We have no title to the place, and after we pull out for good you can file on this quarter section. Meanwhile I'll see what I can do about finding you a man."

His name was Henry Kline, a wasted oldster, and the first one of the three men Kate had working for her before the stage lines shut down. Kline lasted a week; then he asked for his pay, took the stage to town, and went on a drunk. It was the last Kate saw of him.

Art Cleaver was a gaunt man of about forty, a hard worker who kept to himself until the day he cornered Kate in the barn. Kate, weak with terror, grabbed a spade and slammed the flat of it against Cleaver's head. Cleaver forgot his lust and broke down and shuffled abjecting down the road, without even bothering to collect his wages or gather his few possessions. After that Kate wondered dismally if Tidwell would be able to find her another hostler, and what the next one would be like.

He rode into the yard the next morning, and he had not been sent by Tidwell. He was mounted on a wiry mustang, a thin-faced youth with light hair, a silky mustache, and narrow shoulders. A Colt clung to his bony thigh, and there was a Winchester in his saddle boot.

He took his hat off to Kate and said in the softest way, "Ma'am, I've heard it mentioned that the man you had working here quit. Would you be needing another hand?"

Kate hesitated. He seemed so young, so small, to handle the giant stage horses. "Can you handle horses?" she asked. "Hitch them proper?"

"I'm a fair hand with horses, ma'am."

His voice held the calm assurance of an experienced man. Kate smiled and introduced herself.

"Have you had your breakfast?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then up your horse and come inside," Kate said cheerfully, and went to the house to cook his breakfast, thinking it would be nice to have someone near her own age around the place.

He told her to call him Gad, and they got along fine. Gad was shy and retiring; when the stage pulled in he had the fresh team ready to harness, but he held the horses until the driver and guard had gone inside for

their coffee. Kate watched him from the window, and knew instinctinvely that he was gentle and skillful with horses. Beneath his hands the big animals stood docile, and she could see his mouth move as he spoke soothing words to them.

There were no passengers this trip. Passengers to Vinton were rare now, while the stage to Colmar was always crowded.

"They're pulling out fast," the driver told her. "Three tent saloons folded last week, and one of the stores is closing down Saturday. We'll keep running as long as the folks up there need transportation to Colmar, though."

The shotgun guard had been watching Gad. "I see you got yourself a new hand," he said to Kate. "What happened to Cleaver?"

"He quit," Kate said, knowing that, if the truth came out, more than one man in Colmar would feel obliged to kill Cleaver.

"That kid looks familiar," the guard said. "Have you ever seen him, Dan?"

The driver watched Gad lead the tired team to the barn. "Can't say that I have." He rose. "We'd better roll. See you next trip, Kate."

After the stage had gone, Kate went out and found Gad watering the team at the creek. She kept an eye on him all morning, and by noon she was satisfied that he knew his business. He fed and then curried the horses; he cleaned the stables shed and raked the corral. If there was anything odd about him, it was the fact that he hadn't removed his waist gun.

Kate remarked about it when they were having their noon meal. She smiled and said, "Why do you wear your gun, Gad? It seems to me it would get in your way while you're working."

"Snakes, ma'am," he answered, wooden-faced. "You can never tell when you'll run into a snake."

Kate laughed. "You won't find any snakes around here this time of year, Gad."

He shot her a quick bright glance, and it gave her the feeling that she had touched a sore spot. He reached over for the Colmar *Sentinal* the driver had dropped off, and again she saw his mouth move as he scanned the page. Finally he tossed the paper aside.

"I should've had more schooling, I reckon."

"Can't you read, Gad?"

He reddened. "Barely," he said sullenly.

"I could teach you," Kate said quietly. "It'll give us both something to do during the evenings."

Something moved painfully across his face. He said in a hesitant way, "We might give it a try." He rose then, and stretched, obviously embarrassed. "I'd better get back to work, I reckon," he mumbled, and went out.

THE ranchers drove their cattle down from the high country, held their roundup, and then pushed their market gather to the railroad, fifty miles distant. Snow fell early that year in the high country, and work at the diggings stopped. Wagons passed daily now, loaded high with plunder. Kate knew that it wouldn't be long before the stages stopped running.

During this time Gad was a big help, and Kate appreciated it. After supper they sat under the lamp, and she taught him what she could. At times he seemed eager to learn, but more often than not he turned sulky for no apparent reason and went to his bunk in the barn. Twice that she knew of, he saddled his horse and rode out, and she was asleep both times before he returned.

It was seldom, now, that she had a customer in her store. But quite often miners stopped by on their way from Vinton and bought a meal. Some of them, having gone broke at the gambling tables, begged food, and Kate never turned them away. Others, having struck it rich, left her outrageous tips.

Two miners were beaten, and robbed of their dust. The first Kate knew about it was when Bell, the district sheriff, stopped by with a three-man posse. He told her it had happened the previous night.

"They told me they dropped in here for a meal," he said. "Two bearded fellers riding mules. They camped off the road about halfway to town, and were asleep when these men jumped 'em. One of the thieves wore a patch over his right eye. Have you seen anyone like that around lately?"

Kate recalled the miners, but she had seen nothing of a one-eyed man. "If he stops here I'll get word to you," she told Bell.

This happened three days before Tom War-

ing stopped by on his way home from the railroad. Kate was in the yard when he rode up and said to her, "Well, I see you're still here."

"Yes."

"I heard about your father. Sorry it happened."

"Thank you," Kate said, and felt a warm stirring. Though she hated to admit it, she knew she was glad to see him.

"You staying for the winter?" he asked.

As she nodded, his gaze darted past her and she saw his eyes sparkle with sudden anger. She looked back. Gad had come past the corner of the house unexpectedly, and now he stood balanced on the balls of his feet, a cold smile around his mouth, his hand like a claw above the butt of his gun.

Waring said, "You have your nerve, staying in this valley." Gad did not answer, and Waring said to Kate, "How long has he been here?"

Kate glanced from Gad back to Waring. "About three weeks," she said. "Why?"

"He's the one who rustled my beef while he was working for me," Waring said.

Kate looked at Gad. "Is that true?"

Gad kept watching Waring, but his face reddened. "I reckon I got mixed up with bad company, ma'am."

Waring snorted. "I want you out of this country. You have till morning. If you're not out of here by then, I'll see that you end up in the pen."

Kate said sharply, "Now you wait a minute. He's just a boy who made a mistake."

Waring cut her short. "No," he said flatly. "Remember what I said," he told Gad, then swung his horse and galloped away.

Gad's eyes glittered strangely, and he would not look directly at Kate. She said, "You don't have to leave, Gad. I'll talk to Bell, and I'm sure you'll be allowed to stay."

Gad shook his head. "Waring'll be back, and he'll prefer charges. I have to leave."

Kate suddenly hated Waring, for she knew Gad was right. The rancher would prefer charges, and see that Gad served time. "I wish there were something I could do," she said. "I'll miss you, Gad."

His bright gaze touched her for a warm moment, and then his eyes turned bleak and cold. "I reckon I'll get along just fine," he said, and swung abruptly toward the barn.

Waring was true to his word. He rode in early next morning, and Sheriff Bell was with him. Kate came outside and said coldly, "You needn't have bothered. Gad was gone an hour after you left yesterday."

Bell said, "I guess that does it." Then he said, "Have you ever seen that one-eyed man around, Miss Belknap?"

"No."

"All told, now, I've received five robbery reports, and the one-eyed man was mixed up in two of 'em, which makes me think that he must have been in on the rest too. All the miners were robbed on the road between here and town. All of 'em were badly beaten, and between 'em they lost close to ten thousand dollars' worth of dust and gold coins." He watched her closely.

Kate paled with anger. "Are you trying to say that I had anything to do with the robberies?"

"That's not what he's getting at," Waring said. "What he means is that Gad was around when these miners stopped by."

"What of it?"

"I'm thinking he might've been working with the thieves," Bell said. "He could pretty well tell, from the way these miners acted, if they had anything worth stealing or not. Then he could've gone after dark to tell his partners. Maybe he was even in on the robberies themselves."

Kate remembered with a queer catch in her throat that Gad had ridden out twice after dark—that she knew about. But that didn't prove anything. She said, "I don't believe it for a minute."

"He's a bad one," Waring said. "Maybe he looked like an overgrown kid to you, but he's a lot older than you think, and plenty mean."

"You're wrong," Kate flashed. "He's good and gentle inside. I spent hours with him, teaching him to read and write, and I know."

"Which way did he go?" Bell asked.

"Toward the pass."

"He may be up at Vinton. I'll have to take a look, I reckon." He touched his hat. "Sorry to be a bother, Miss Belknap."

"No bother at all," Kate said coldly, and watched him and Waring turn up the road.

She had never felt so sick and alone in her life.

HARRISON and Holbrook stopped running their stages the following week, and Kate was on her own. The days passed, and snow blanketed the valley. Where before she'd had more work than she could handle, now time lay heavy on her hands. She spent hours with her father, either reading to him or just sitting. Now and then a stray rider stopped by for tobacco, or a meal.

She wondered about Gad, and what had happened to him. Waring came once and told her they had not found Gad at Vinton. He asked if she needed anything; he offered to send her a side of beef, but she refused. After this he did not return, and the few times she saw him in town, or riding past on the road, he made it a point to ignore her.

She had a gentleman caller. His name was Pate, and he was a gruff, kindly, middle-aged bachelor, who had a ranch at the north end of the valley. He took to dropping in, after he came by one day saying he needed a lantern, and that he'd been told Kate had lanterns in stock.

Kate enjoyed his company, but she didn't encourage him. He took her to nearby socials, and each time left one of his riders to stay with Sam Belknap. Kate had him over for Christmas dinner, and she had a moment of weakness when he asked awkwardly for her hand in marriage.

But she refused him as gently as possible, and that night she cried for the first time, out of sheer loneliness. Maybe she should have accepted him—or moved to town, as Tidwell had suggested. Then she remembered what she had set out to do, and she closed her mind to everything but the need to succeed on her own.

Winter passed, and then it was spring, and the stage line did not reopen its route to Vinton. "Those ledges and bars are just about played out up there," Tidwell told her. "We might break even for a month or two if we reopen the route, but that's about all. I'm sorry, Kate."

"Then I mean to file on this quarter section," Kate said. "How much do you people want for the buildings?"

Tidwell smiled. "The buildings are yours, Kate."

Kate filed. She bought a breaking plow and a husky team of mules, and went to work. She was surprised that Waring didn't come by and order her to move, now that she was no longer connected with the stage line.

Then it was April. One evening, having just finished supper, Kate heard voices out by the barn. She went to the back door and saw that one of the barn doors was open. As she crossed the yard there was a shot from inside. When she got there she saw a man pitching hay over the carcass of a horse.

As she turned to make a run for the house, someone accosted her. She saw it was Gad. His face was harder, bonier, than she remembered, and his eyes chilled her.

He said curtly, "Hold it. Do as you're told and you won't be hurt." And then, "Hurry it up, Whitey!"

The other came out, and when Kate saw that a patch covered his right eye, she felt faint and sick inside. "So it was true," she said to Gad. "You helped rob those miners."

"That's a long way down the creek," Gad said. "Now listen. We had a little trouble in town, and there's a posse after us. They'll probably stop here, but you're going to say you never saw us."

"There are two horses in the corral. Why don't you take them and leave?"

"Never mind," Gad said, and cocked his head, listening. She heard it then, the sound of running horses on the road. "Inside," Gad said quickly. "And remember what I told you. If you say the wrong thing, a lot of men are going to die—and your father will be the first one."

They entered the house. "When they ride into the yard, open the door and stand there, but don't step outside," Gad told her.

She obeyed: there was nothing else she could do. Six horsemen rode out of the dusk and reined up in the light that fell through the doorway, and she was surprised to see that Tom Waring was one of them. He gave her a careful look, but made no gesture of greeting.

Sheriff Bell said, "Did you hear a rider within the last half hour?"

"No. Is something wrong?"

Bell said there was plenty wrong. Three

men had tried to rob the stage depot. They had killed Tidwell, but not before Tidwell had killed one of them.

The night marshal got there just as the other two rode away, and he shot one of their horses, so they doubled up. "That fellow Gad you had working here is one of 'em; the one-eyed man is the other."

"Gad?" she said, trying to show surprise. She looked straight at Tom Waring and tried to shoot her message across to him, but no change came over his hard face. "I heard nothing," she said.

"Well, they can't be too far ahead of us," Bell said. "Let's ride, boys. Maybe we can cut 'em off from the pass."

AFTER they'd gone, Kate closed the door and looked coldly at Gad. "You knew Tidwell, you've spoken with him, and now you've killed him. How could you?"

"He started the shooting," Gad answered sullenly. "Whitey, take a look around and see what you can see."

Whitey went out, and Kate said, "Why don't you leave now?"

"Later." He went to the table where her books were piled, and laughed shortly as he picked one of them up. "Remember when I used to try to read this stuff?"

Kate said, "You were at least making an effort to better yourself. Look at you now."

An about-to-cry expression moved nakedly across his face. "I wish—I wish—" he said, and then with a sudden grunt of anger and contempt he tossed the book aside. "Fix us some grub to take along," he said sullenly.

He watched her from the doorway. "Have you been making out all right?" he said.

"You've lost the right to ask me that."

He looked away from her. "What the hell's keeping Whitey?" He went past her to the back door, opened it, and looked out. He called, "Hey, Whitey!" and cocked his head, listening.

In a moment Whitey's voice came out of the darkness, sounding shaky. "Come out here, Gad!"

Just then Kate heard the front door creak open. She glanced quickly at Gad.

"You come here!" Gad called.

"Take a look at these horses!"

Gad muttered something. And then he shouted, "Come here, damn you!" He waited a second, then suddenly slammed the door and turned, his face pale. "They got him! I know they got him. They're all around the place."

"It's your imagination."

"Then why doesn't Whitey come in?"

As he spoke, he started for the front of the house. "There's somebody in there," he muttered. "Come here and get ahead of me."

She went past him and looked into the big front room that was half store, half dining room, and saw Tom Waring standing in the middle of the floor. Suddenly Gad gave her a hard shove away and fired.

Waring moved at the shot, and the bullet missed. He hesitated to fire for fear of hitting Kate, and Gad shot a second time. Waring's arm jerked and he dropped his gun. As he bent to pick it up with his left hand, Gad fired again and missed.

As he took careful aim, Kate threw herself in front of him. "You'll have to kill me too, Gad!"

"I'll do it if I have to!"

"Then shoot!"

A sob wrenched from Gad. He centered the gun on her, and his mouth worked. Then suddenly he gave an inarticulate cry of frustration and pain, and ran through the kitchen and out the back door. There was a burst of gunfire, then silence.

Waring said, "They got him."

Kate's voice shook. "I thought—" She started to cry, and Waring put his good arm around her.

"You've been fighting too hard."

Her sobs increased.

"But you've proved yourself, and I'm proud," Waring said awkwardly. "Now's the time to stop fighting."

"I'll never stop fighting."

"I mean fighting me." Waring said. "Do you know what I mean?"

She nodded her head against his shirt.

"I guess we've both known for some time, but we've been too stubborn to face it. Shall we give it a chance and see how it works out?"

"Yes," Kate said.

She thought fleetingly of the year she had spent here. It had been hard, but not too hard, and it had brought her her man.

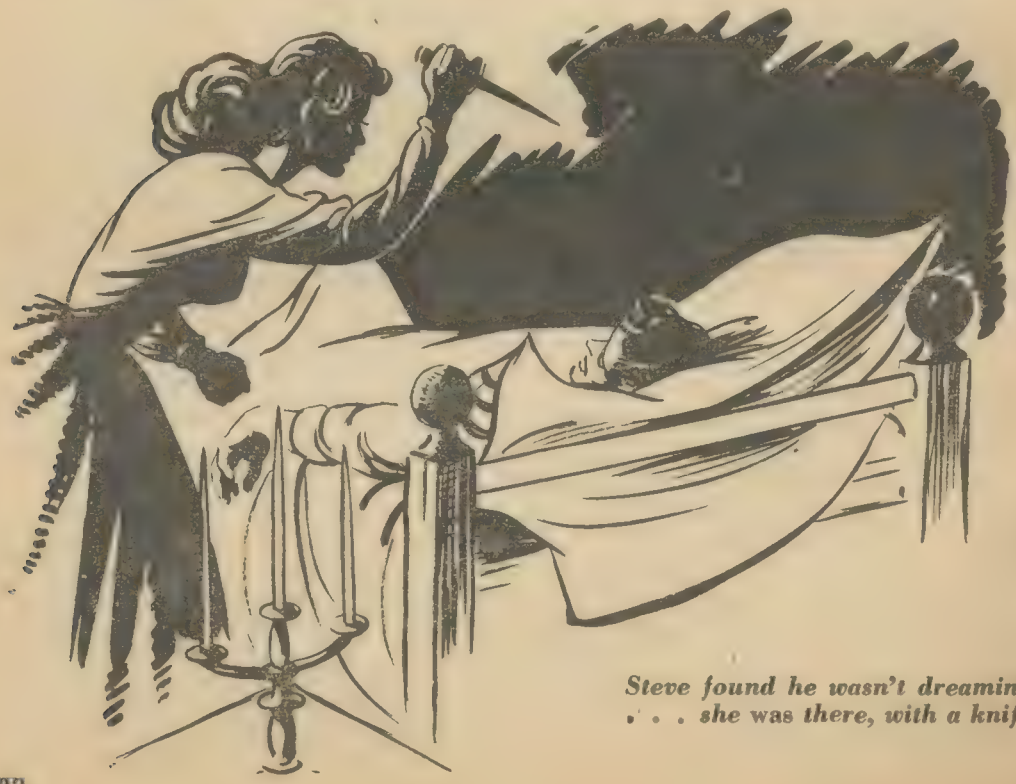
COMANCHERO'S DAUGHTER

By V. E. THIESSEN

STEVE KNEW his mission would be dangerous . . . but he hadn't counted on the extra peril of facing a girl with murder on her mind

LYING flat behind the great bole of a cottonwood tree, Lieutenant Steven Derrick had the wry thought that although this certainly wouldn't be his first mistake, it had a good chance of being his last one. He poked his big Sharps buffalo rifle around the tree and squeezed off a shot toward one of his attackers, who were hidden in the tall prairie grass. An answering shot came from somewhere off to his left and ripped cottonwood bark above his head. The echoes died, and the grass swayed ahead of him in the afternoon sun like a gentle, peaceful sea.

There were at least two of them in the grass ahead. They had already captured his hides, for his retreat from his camp to the



Steve found he wasn't dreaming . . . she was there, with a knife

cover of this cottonwood fringe gave them a good opportunity to rob him. He had figured that they would be content to take the wagon-load of buffalo hides and go. Now that looked like a serious mistake in figuring.

He shifted his shoulder slightly; the tensions of battle always twinged an old arrow wound. Perhaps if he made a break for his horse, tied a hundred yards behind him, he could get out of this.

Another shot, two inches lower than the last one, whammed bark from the cottonwood. The way that devil was shooting, Steve could take just about one step. He grinned suddenly, the smile faintly bitter, different from his usual one. The irony was that he had brought this on himself.

He had rigged those hides to be stolen; he had wanted to be attacked and robbed by the Comancheros, the Mexicans who traded with the Comanches. Then the hides would find their way back through Comanchero channels and sometime, somewhere, they would come to the attention of José Rael, the man he was trying to reach.

Everything had worked just as he planned, except that the Indians wouldn't take the damned hides and go. They seemed to be mighty intent on killing him, and worrying about the hides afterward.

He saw the grass moving, and fired again. There was no sound, and he realized the movement might have been one of the idle September breezes. Still, he knew the attackers were moving in, converging on him through the tall prairie grass. Unless he could see them, he wouldn't have a chance.

The trouble was, there was a clear area around the cottonwood. If he tried for some high grass cover for himself, or for his horse, he'd be picked off before he reached any kind of concealment. And once the two hidden Indians got separated enough, so that the angles were right, he would be unable even to keep the tree between himself and both of them.

From his left rear a new shot sounded, and he bellied into the ground, thinking he had made another mistake, that there were three of them and the last one was back there by his horse. He could imagine the next bullet slapping into his exposed back, somewhere along the spine, and his big hands suddenly felt slippery with sweat. He tightened his grip on the rifle, prepared to dig the butt into the ground to give him a fast start so he could make a try for some grass of his own to hide in.

The gun behind him spoke, and the man ahead of him yelled. Shock held Steve for a moment, the shock of total surprise. Whoever was behind him was shooting at the Indians, not at him.

His assailants knew it, too. He could see the grass waving as they got out of there, fast. He figured there was a good chance he could have pumped shots into them, now that he could see them moving. The temptation was great; but that would mean the failure of his plans.

His unknown helper apparently did not wish their death either. After that one shot, there was silence on the sea of grass. Steve heard hoofs running away from his camp, and then heard the wheels of his hide wagon moving.

He knew that, by some fantastic chance, his plan had worked after all. For whatever it was worth, the hides and their message had begun their journey.

He got up, dusted the dirt from the knees of his butternut jeans, wiped his big hands clean on cottonwood leaves, shouldered his Sharps rifle, and set off through the fringe of trees to thank his unknown helper. He passed his horse, tied where he had left it, and reached the trampled ring of grass where his unknown friend had been.

No one was there. A mocking bird shrilled into the still air as if it had been alone throughout the long afternoon. Steve Derrick went down on his hands and knees to inspect a footprint that had been left in the soft ground.

It was the print was of a woman's shoe. The shape in the grass where she had lain was slowly disappearing as the grass sprang back, but with his eyes and nose to the ground Steve caught a faint and vanishing whiff of perfume.

He got up thoughtfully and turned back to his horse. Steve, boy, he thought soberly, what in thunder have you gotten yourself into this time?

HE RODE on a few miles downstream that evening, though there was not much of the day left, following the valley of that temperamental river, the Rio Colorado. Along much of the way, the river made a great, rough, broken trough that was several hundred feet below the sea of prairie grass through which he rode.

But this cut became more gentle, and he knew he was approaching the crossing that José Rael had often mentioned. José's home was supposed to be there somewhere. Perhaps Steve had been a complete fool. Perhaps he could simply ride down there, ask the way to the Rael Place, and find José at home. Perhaps this whole journey had been unnecessarily long and complex.

But this was a long way from Fort Bascom, and if he had ridden down here in uniform, looking for a deserter, the chances were he'd have been shot in the back long before now. There was more than one deserter in this country, and army officers were not popular with them, or with the Comanches, or with the Comancheros who traded with the Indians.

So Steve had chosen to shed his officer's uniform and join a group of buffalo hunters, and to hunt his way down this far, dressed in old clothes and carrying a big Sharps rifle and a Colt frontier model pistol, instead of his army carbine.

Technically, Sergeant José Rael wasn't a deserter. He was AWOL. But with some army exercises coming up, his failure to return was sure to be called desertion by Major Hall, who had a ramrod for a backbone and a cold lead bullet for a heart. More than this, Sergeant Rael's knowledge of the country, and his ability to speak the Comanche tongue, were needed in Fort Bascom.

Steve had been given three weeks' leave, and instructions to bring Rael back. Major Hall had frowned at him with piercing pale-blue eyes, and had made it quite clear that they were both to be back at the end of the three weeks. If Steve failed to return, the major would consider him a deserter too. If he returned without Rael, the dereliction of duty would be reported to Washington.

The major carefully ignored the fact that, if he had given Rael leave at first, the whole mess would have been unnecessary. Rael had received word that his father had been stabbed almost to death. Major Hall had refused to give him leave to visit his father because the army needed him.

Steve swore softly at the memory. Rael had been a good soldier. Now he would be busted down to the rank of private, and dislike for the major would increase the discontent that now plagued the troops. This was the best that could happen, even if Steve were successful. But ten of his twenty-one days were already gone.

Steve made camp without a fire that evening, for this was dangerous country. Just below his camp, the river feathered out into an easy crossing, with broad green *vegas* of spring-fed grass. Mexicans, who had thus far lived peaceably with the Comanches because of their trade, were settled there. Comanches, too, roamed here in parties, from the Llano Estacado, bringing beef stolen from the Texans, wagon train goods still wet with blood, or perhaps a white woman or child.

These would be traded to the Comancheros, who would in turn manage to sell the beef to the quartermaster at Fort Bascom, and the other goods wherever they might. Any way you looked at it, this quiet sea of grass was deadly underneath the gentle whisper of its surface.

Steve was making camp when he heard the sound of a rustling behind him. His hands were loaded with firewood. He threw the wood from him violently and whirled toward the new danger. His hand was halfway to the pistol at his hip when it stopped, and his body for a moment was immobile with shock.

A girl stared at him from the thicket. She was almost hidden, but now that he had seen her she apparently no longer felt any need for concealment. She stood, as motionless as he. She was dressed in white buckskin, splashed with beads in a motif that was at once Indian and something beyond Indian. Her hair was dark, but in curls, not straight like an Indian's, and her skin was as white as Steve's own. She held a rifle beside her, its butt on the ground.

She looked at him for a moment, without fear, studying him in the moments of his shock. Then she turned quietly and stepped back into the thicket.

STEVE'S muscles unlocked and he plunged after her. This must be the girl who had defended him earlier. She could have circled and followed him to find out about him. He prowled through the thicket. She had vanished; undoubtedly she knew this country far better than he did. After a moment he thought he heard hoofs. He approached the sound, but a moment later he heard another noise, this time back at the camp he had left.

He walked back swiftly. Someone was there, all right. He paused in the same thicket the girl had used, to study his second visitor. A lean, dark-haired man sat a horse in the middle of the clearing, where Steve's blankets and saddle were thrown. Steve studied him, and slipped his pistol into his hand.

The visitor's body was tall and whip-hard, and his face was burned to a dirty, leathery brown by the prairie sun. He had a scar high on one cheekbone, the white mark slanting up toward his eyebrows. His glistening eyes were small, black, and knowing.

Steve's muscles tightened as the visitor turned, exposing his left side, and the fact that his left arm was bandaged. Steve stepped out with his gun ready.

"Looking for me?" he asked softly.

The stranger turned those bright eyes on him. "Reckon you can put the gun away," he said. "I'm not looking for trouble. I saw your camp and thought I'd drop by to say hello. You're a buffalo hunter, aren't you?"

"That's right," Steve said.

"I figured so. You don't look like one of those damned settle-downers. I hunt a little myself. I've been around here most of my life. My name's Hugo, Jess Hugo. You're a stranger, aren't you?"

Steve nodded, puzzled by the man's chatter. He had a feeling that all this talk was covering up something, that the man was normally silent and was forcing himself to babble.

The stranger stopped. His voice changed slightly. "You haven't any tobacco, have you, friend?"

For a moment Steve almost laughed aloud. So that was the stranger's hidden purpose! "I might have a little," he said. Going to his saddlebag, he got a small sack of tobacco and offered it to his visitor. "Keep it," he offered. "I have some more."

"Well, thanks. Thanks a whole lot." Jess Hugo smiled.

Steve considered his visitor now as a possible source of information. He said, "Maybe, since you're a native, you can tell me where I can find some people—a Mexican family named Rael."

Hugo shot him a quick sharp glance. "They have a house not far from here. Do you know the Raels?"

"By hearsay. I've heard the old man is sort of a head of the Mexican clan around here, that most of the Comancheros are his people. I figured I'd like to talk to him, now I'm in the area."

"I can take you down there," Hugo offered. "Only we'd have to go this evening. I have business tomorrow. Probably old Rael will ask you to stay the night. They're hospitable people, these Mexicans, especially the important ones."

Steve said, "I'll saddle up."

He watched Hugo rolling a cigarette. The bandaged arm seemed to be giving him some trouble. The bandages were clean, and Steve wondered if the wound were fresh. Hugo's eyes met his own, and Steve knew his glance had been interpreted. "It's a knife wound," Hugo said. "Some of these people aren't so hospitable."

Steve nodded, and swung up into the saddle. Some of his suspicions were alive again. Hugo's eyes had been especially shiny when he explained the wound, and Steve was remembering the man who had yelled just after the woman's shot in the tall grass.

"I'll follow you," he said sharply. "Go ahead."

Hugo nodded, and they began to ride down toward the crossing of the Rio Colorado. Steve kept his hand on his pistol.

But no trouble developed during their short ride. The moon was rising when they rode down one of the long grassy valleys on the far side of the river and came to a house, a great and dark shadow in the moonlight. As they rode closer, Steve could see that it was an adobe structure. The roof poles projected out through the walls and threw shadows like bars across the walls. Somewhere outside, a dog

barked. Then Hugo gave the signal to dismount.

The house was alight with candles, and here and there a kerosene lantern swung against its metal sconce and added a flickering yellowish light. It appeared that Hugo knew the Raels better than he had indicated, for they were admitted without question. A servant indicated that old José Rael would see them at once.

THEY stepped across the room into a larger one. Steve's senses sharpened, and the arrow wound twinged in his shoulder again. Almost before he knew what was wrong, he felt himself going taut. Then he realized what was bothering him. There was a scent of perfume in the house, the same faint odor that he had smelled where the woman had lain in the grass beyond the cottonwood.

A voice in front of him said, "You will excuse my remaining seated."

Steve jerked his mind to business. Old José Rael was seated in a wheelchair, a blanket thrown over his knees against the faint chill of evening. He was a large-boned man whose flesh had withered with age and now hung slackly. His hair was white, and his skin, though wrinkled, was as evenly browned as pale, clear coffee. He stared at Steve out of clear dark eyes that had lost little of their youth.

Behind the old man stood the woman Steve had seen in the thicket. She wore a dress now, made in a Spanish style, and a silver-and-turquoise comb was thrust into her hair. The same air of poise clung to her that he had noticed before, and now, seeing the poise of Rael, he knew its origin. Though the old man was confined to the chair, he sat like a king. Steve thought, Why, this must be Conchita, José's sister.

He was suddenly aware that he had been staring at the girl. Her color heightened, and he turned his regard hastily to the old man. Beside him, Jess Hugo spoke to Rael, bridging the uneasiness.

"I reckoned you'd want to see this buffalo hunter. He was asking where you lived."

Steve said swiftly, "I'm sorry to bother you so late, Mr. Rael, but when I met Jess Hugo and he offered to show me the way here I just couldn't turn down the chance. I'm looking for a younger man, José Rael. Perhaps he's your son."

"Yes." The man's eyes stabbed through him, searching for his motives.

Steve shrugged his shoulders. The arrow wound gave its old twitch. "I knew him at Fort Bascom. My hides were stolen this afternoon, and I thought I'd stop by before I started trying to find them."

The old man said gently, "You are a friend of my son. Very well. José will be back in three days. When he returns there is a chance we may get the hides back."

Steve nodded. The old man was no fool. He hadn't questioned Steve's statement that they were friends. But he'd made it clear that he would wait for José's return, and confirm the statement, before he offered more than the usual courtesy.

The old man continued, "Manuel will show you where you may sleep." He glanced at Jess Hugo, who had lingered in the background. "Good night, Jess."

Steve followed the servant to a room with a comfortable bed. He pulled off his boots and undressed with a kind of numb unbelief. Things couldn't be as simple as this. Wait three days, and Sergeant José Rael will return. His father was obviously recovering. Steve had not lied when he said that he and José were friends. He could convince José to return with him. Things seemed so simple they worried him.

A gentle tap on the door disturbed his thoughts. He crossed the room in his stocking feet and opened it. The girl stood there, smiling at him, half friendly, half embarrassed.

She said, "Father asked me to see if you were quite comfortable."

"Indeed I am." He smiled suddenly. "So you're José's sister, Conchita. He's spoken of you."

Her eyes warmed. "You knew him at Fort Bascom, you said. Were you hunting there?"

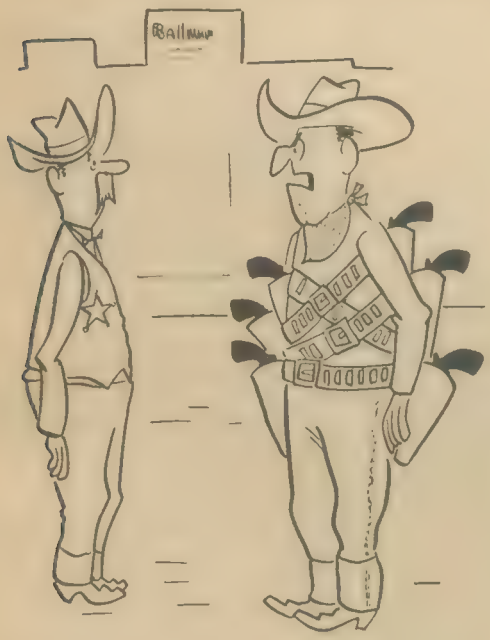
Steve dodged the question. "There are a lot of hunters around Bascom. Your brother is a good hunter himself."

"Yes. I think he would like to go back to Bascom if he could."

"If he could?" He stared at her. "Why couldn't he?"

She shook her head. "It is a long tale, but there is no need to worry you with our troubles. Goodnight."

WHEN he finally fell asleep he dreamed of Conchita Rael. She was incredibly close, tantalizing him with her perfume, and he could reach out for her, but could never quite get her into his arms. He seemed to wake in his dream to find the scent



"Stranger, they don't call me 'sixgun Wiley' for nothin'!"

of her perfume doubled and her slim figure bending over him.

Awareness stabbed him. The wakening was real, no part of the dream. She *was* bending over him, a knife in her hand. He rolled, reached upward, and grabbed her wrist in its descent. The blade came down as he pulled, and it stabbed into the bed beside him as she fell forward. Then she was laying across him, struggling like an animal, her perfume and her breath and her nearness pressed against him in the struggle. After a moment he had pinned her with an arm across her shoulders. She lay then, looking at him, her struggles ceased for a moment of rest, hating him with her eyes.

He said in amazement, "Why should you try to kill me?"

Her voice hated him, too. *"Cavrone!* You were lucky. You stabbed old José, and in another moment I would have stabbed you."

He stared at her in wonder. "Now wait a minute, spitfire! Why do you think I stabbed your father?"

She said, "Your knife was in the load of buffalo hides—your other knife. It was like this one that stabbed my father."

"My other knife?" He glanced at the knife in her pinioned hand. It was unusual, with a silver-and-turquoise handle. He imagined it must be one of a treasured pair. Obviously the knife had been placed in his hides by an enemy.

"Who found the knife in my hides—Jess Hugo?"

"Yes."

He grinned at her. "Look, spitfire. Saving my life this afternoon doesn't give you the right to kill me tonight."

He saw that penetrate her consciousness. Her eyes clouded, though the hatred remained. He released her and sat up. She got up, moving like one sleepwalking. He said gently, "Conchita."

"Yes?"

"I was with your brother in Fort Bascom when your father was stabbed. When he comes back you can ask him."

She stared at him for a moment. Then she slipped the knife somewhere into the top of her dress and moved softly out of the room, closing the door behind her. He did not know whether she believed him or not.

Sleep was slow in coming after her departure, and an hour later he became aware of noise in the great room where he had met José's father. There were several voices pitched in argument, and then at length all noise ceased. After that there were many footsteps, which came along the hallway until they stopped at the door to his room. He sat up, groping for his gun beside the bed.

A voice cut sharply into the room. "Hold it!"

Three men had come through the door. Behind them Manuel, the servant, held a kerosene lamp. The yellow light glinted off the gun in Jess Hugo's hand. Hugo said, "Put your pants on and come on out, you damned killer."

Steve struggled into his trousers. His gunbelt was within his reach, but the handle was turned wrong, so that he could not grab the Colt out of the holster belt before Hugo could shoot him down.

Hugo said, "Go downstairs. You walk ahead of me."

Steve moved through the hallways, aware of the night chill that had crept into the house. It must be three or four in the morning, he thought.

Hugo must have planted the knife in his hides, which meant that Hugo himself must have stabbed José's father. Back at the fort there had been rumors of a man who was establishing himself as head of a lawless group of Comancheros, stealing from the whites and selling to the Indians. Jess Hugo might be that man. Old Rael had been trying to build another kind of society, and Hugo had tried to put him out of the way. Steve represented an unknown factor, and Hugo was going to saddle him with Rael's stabbing, and hang him.

Hugo said, "In there," and gestured with his gun.

Steve entered the large room where he had met Rael. José's father was there, waiting, as he had been when Steve had first met him, but dressed differently, so it was obvious that he had been awakened from sleep. Behind him was Conchita, her hand resting on his shoulder. Steve looked at her questioningly. She gave her head a little shake, and he knew that this was not her doing, and that she had not told of her attempt to kill him.

HUGO said, "Sit dow, *Cavrone!*" The oath was rancorous on his tongue. Steve sat down on a hard chair and looked at José's father. Old Rael had the turqoise-handled knife on his lap. He spoke, and the effect of his leadership was clear on the others. Even Hugo was held by his voice.

"Hugo and his friends wanted to hang you, so they hid the knife in your wagon of buffalo hides. Yet the old lawlessness of my people must die, and thus you are allowed to speak for yourself. Is the weapon yours?"

"No." Steve said.

His mind was racing furiously. He had the best alibi in the world, the fact that he had been in Fort Bascon with young José. Yet Hugo held the gun, and if he betrayed this fact, Hugo might see that the only way out of his own trap was to shooot Steve, old Rael, and later José himself. It would be this or exposure, for him. Steve's only hope was to delay his own conviction and death until he could get some kind of word to José.

He asked suddenly, "Is my wagonload of hides here?"

Old Rael shook his head. "Hugo has sent the hides back to the river crossing to be sold. But if you are innocent and a friend of my son's, the money will be given to you."

Steve's heart leaped. There was still the possibility that José would see those marked hides. They were marked with numbers, the same numbers that José used to mark his army equipment. Once he had seen them he would know that someone from Fort Bascom was trying to reach him.

He said, "I cannot prove the truth to you at this moment. If you will keep me guarded until José returns, we may reach the real truth." He watched Hugo's eyes, hoping that the real significance of the delay might escape him.

The old man considered. "It is true that weapon could have been placed in your wagon by another. Perhaps we should wait."

Jess Hugo laughed harshly. The sound, suddenly loud, after old Rael's quiet voice, turned everyone in the room toward him.

"Wait, hell! He's as guilty as sin. I say let's string him up from the ridgepole right now." The gun swung to include old Rael and the girl. "If you don't protect yourself and us against murdering strangers, we'll do it for you. Clovis, Amies, tie his hands."

Steve submitted. He could see that Rael was not convinced of his innocence, at least not sufficiently to risk killing himself or his friends to delay the hanging. And if Steve

tried to resist at this point, he would be gunwhipped into unconsciousness and would have no chance at all. He felt the ropes tighten on his wrists.

And then Conchita came alive. She grabbed the knife from her father's lap and came forward, crying, "Let me have him,. Let me kill the *cavrone.*" She struck him, knocking him to the floor, and swarmed over him as she had once before.

He felt the edge of the knife, not at his throat, but at his wrists, and felt them free behind him, as he rolled over on his back to conceal the fact. Then Conchita was being pulled off him under old Rael's urgent commands. Steve stood up slowly, holding his hands behind him. This was his chance. They might be careless, thinking he was bound. He taunted Hugo.

"You're a fool, Hugo. Somebody will find out that you yourself are the traitor who stabbed your leader."

Hugo stepped forward and swung his gun at Steve's head. Steve ducked under the swing and, bringing his hands from behind his back, slammed a fist into Hugo's middle. Then he whirled and grabbed at the gun of the man beside him. For an instant it stuck in the holster. Then it was clear. He was whirling around with it, when Hugo's gun spoke. A bullet burned into Steve's left arm. If he had not been turning, it would have gone through his chest.

He fired the gun twice, and Hugo fell back against the wall and slid down to the floor. Steve whirled to the third man, and saw Conchita hanging onto his gun arm as he tried to bring his gun to bear on Steve.

A voice from the doorway cried, "Hold it!" Whirling, Steve saw José Rael framed in the doorway. He came forward and laid a hand on Steve's shoulder. "I figured it might be you, when I saw the numbers on the hides." He turned to Hugo's companions. His voice had a ring of leadership like his father's. "Get that carrion out of here." His scornful hand pointed toward Hugo's body. "Then come back in here and meet a friend of mine."

Steve watched them move the body. Then he said, "I'll make it short. I cames to bring you back to Fort Bascom."

Jose studied him with friendly yet puzzled eyes. "That commission came in? I figured I'd lost it when I went AWOL."

Steve stared. "Commission?"

"Yeah. Major Hall had me in for a commission. That's why he wouldn't let me leave. He figured it might come in, or somebody might want to see me to pass on it."

Steve said limply, "I never—"

José grinned. "You're new, Lieutenant. The major will hound you and ride you, but if you do your job he'll look out for you."

Steve looked around the room at Conchita, and at her father. He said, "We'll leave tomorrow."

Old Rael nodded. "There is nothing to keep my son now."

But José was watching Conchita, and then his eyes swung to Steve. He said, "Reckon I'll get that commission, although I'll catch seven kinds of hell with it. And I reckon when I get officer's quarters my sister might like to visit the fort. Do you suppose she might, Lieutenant?"

Steve felt the flush that mounted to his face. The thought was to wonderful to be dragged out into the open like this, as a joke. It would embarrass Conchita.

He found suddenly that he knew as little of women as he knew of Major Hall. Conchita stepped forward suddenly and laid her hand on his arm. She said, "I would very much like to visit the fort, and your friend could look after me when you are busy. Would you do that, Lieutenant?"

Steve could feel the blood in his face. It was warm and racing. He smiled into Conchita's eyes and said gently, "You'll like Fort Bascom, I think. Let's make that visit very soon."

a
Fact
Feature

The Frontier Doctor

POPULAR fallacies seem to exist regarding the health of early pioneers in the West. It is generally believed they were rugged and healthy people who seldom became ill.

Frontier newspapers and land advertisements did their share toward furthering, and even fostering, this popular misconception. In their attempts to promote an area for settlement, they almost always declared the climate to be healthful and invigorating. In addition, they usually claimed enthusiastically that disease was unknown in their particular locality.

In reality, most of the early Western settlements were actually epidemic ridden at one time or another, as well as having a high rate of mortality and general illness. Such diseases as cholera, typhoid fever, diphtheria, smallpox, pleurisy, pneumonia, and other communicable diseases came in epidemic proportions, often wiping out entire families.

At Kansas City in 1855 an epidemic of cholera hit the town, and the inhabitants began to die. In the matter of a short time the days and nights became periods of fear and horror. The living found sleep almost impossible because of the incessant sawing and hammering of workmen building rude coffins. The victims, apparently well in the morning, were suddenly taken ill, and died in agony within twelve hours.

What had occurred in Kansas City was not an exceptional nor an isolated case. It occurred again and again in many other pioneer towns, not only from cholera, but from other contagious diseases as well.

While diphtheria found most of its victims among children, the disease which claimed more young adults than any other was malaria —or, as it was called in those days, the ague. Among the older people pneumonia was the greatest killer.

By Burton L. Wollenzien

The ague, or malaria, was the most prevalent disease on the prairie frontier. It was so common that many people almost came to accept it as being normal. There were naturally many theories as to its cause, but it was not until later years that the mosquito was discovered to be the carrier.

The pioneers had observed that the disease was contracted more readily by the young people who went out early in the morning to round up the horses or oxen in preparation for the day's work. It never occurred to them that the blame should be placed on the mosquitos which thrived in the swamps, damps valleys, and low ground.

The ague brought intermittent periods of chills and fever, with the chill being checked only when it was replaced by the fever. The sick person was subject to violent headaches and long periods of delirium. Short periods of temporary recovery would come, only to be followed by a repetition of the entire attack. These attacks would continue for months, with entire communities being afflicted.

The causes of these many diseases were closely allied with the conditions which existed during those times. Before wells were drilled, there was always the possibility of the water from springs and water holes being contaminated and carrying disease.

Sod houses and dirt floors were a constant source of dust which contaminated the air, the food, and the dishes. Such buildings, with their insufficiency of sunshine and their lack of cleanliness as we know it today, were a fertile breeding place for vermin of all kinds.

Drafty log cabins, improper or insufficient clothing, foods which did not supply the necessary elements for good health, and lack of proper sanitary facilities; all these helped to contribute toward lowering the vitality of the pioneers, until they were easy prey to various diseases.

As an example of the way many of the people came West, uninformed and unprepared for the conditions they would have to meet, consider the plight of many of those who came to Leadville, Colorado, during the early mining days.

Leadville is situated at an altitude of 10,152 feet above sea level and, as could be expected at that altitude, the winters were cold—very cold! Yet thousands upon thousands of people came to Leadville, drawn by the lure of gold. They came totally unprepared for the conditions which existed in the town at that time.

Many of them had clothing that was ridiculousy inadequate for the bitter winter they would have to face. Hundreds of them who tried to reach the town during the winter months perished on the icy mountain trails. But still the flood of gold seekers poured into the town.

ACCOMMODATIONS were wholly inadequate and very expensive. The few hotels and lodging houses turned away hundreds each night. Anyone lucky enough to get a bed usually found himself sharing it with another occupant, in a room which contained many beds. Others curled up on drafty saloon floors, if they could find a vacant spot.

Pneumonia claimed scores of victims, many of whom were buried at night in unmarked graves and without coffins, in an effort to keep the mounting death rate from becoming public knowledge. Hundreds were starving. Many people ate their fill in restaurants—when they could get in—then asked to be arrested and put in jail when they were presented with a bill they could not pay.

Sanitary conditions were deplorable. The streets were either frozen solid, a gumbo of thick sticky mud, or a continual cloud of choking dust. But still people came to Leadville. Far too many never left, they were buried there.

Another problem which the pioneers faced, whether they lived in a farming, ranching or mining area, was the lack of adequate medical care. There were few doctors, and they were not well trained. A common school education was all that was required for entrance into medical school. After a two-year course, the student was given his M.D. degree and allowed to practice medicine. It is believed that before restrictive laws were passed in the Territories, some men may have practised medicine without benefit of any training at all along that line.

Many patent medicines were peddled from town to town, with the claims being made that they were a cure-all for almost everything

from a human stomach ache to spavin in a horse. In a good many instances, these "medicines" were simply preparations concocted for the sole purpose of making money from those gullible enough to fall for the vender's spiel.

The frontier doctor endured unimaginable hardships. Making long wearying rides, working under almost impossible conditions—often with inadequate equipment and knowledge of their profession—it is small wonder that many of these doctors took to drink. They may even have performed operations while intoxicated, at times not even knowing if the patient was dead or alive when they finished.

One of the chief drawbacks to the practise of medicine on the frontier was the long distances to be traveled at all hours of the day or night. This sort of thing, and the irregular hours, all combined to wear down the doctor's health. Often, in the dead of winter, he was asked to travel out to a settler's cabin twenty or thirty miles away, over trails which were practically invisible under the swirling snow.

Arriving at his destination with his few instruments, he was expected to be able to handle the case, whether it was pneumonia, a gangrenous infection, a gunshot wound, childbirth, or a contagious disease. And he had no trained nurse to help him.

Often the doctor would return to his home, looking forward to getting some sleep. But another summons would come, and he would start out to face the blizzard again on another night ride. Many times the doctor slept only while going to or returning from his errands of mercy, dozing on the back of his mount or in the seat of the buggy as the horses found their way home unguided.

He worked without benefit of stethoscope or clinical thermometer. He had no serums, antitoxins, or wonder drugs such as we have today. Often working with makeshift instruments and without anesthetics other than a stiff drink of whisky for the patient, he performed operations with the patient lying on a kitchen table or an inverted wagon bed, and under other strange conditions.

One doctor performed an amputation using a bowie knife and a carpenter's saw. The patient survived. These doctors did the best they could with what they had. Often they had to fashion a crude instrument out of baling wire or old iron. They used the assistance of friends or neighbors of the injured person, to hold lamps so they could see what they were doing, or to administer the chloroform and perform the other duties which the present-day doctor delegates to trained assistants.

The pioneer doctor had to contend with many home remedies which the settlers concocted, as well as all the patent medicines on the market. While some of these home remedies and patent medicines really had curative powers, others did more harm than good.

As if all these problems were not enough, the doctor was plagued by the matter of trying to collect fees for his work. The pioneer felt that doctor's fees were execessively high. In some areas, the average bill for one trip was fifteen to twenty-five dollars. Such a bill was often paid off by giving the doctor a calf or a colt in payment. Other settlers were unable to pay anything on their bills.

When one considers the distances these pioneer physicians and surgeons had to travel, and the atrocious conditions under which they often had to work, they were entitled to the fees they charged. There is little doubt that the doctors charged higher fees to those who could afford it, in an effort to offset the absence of payment from many.

While on the subject of health in the pioneer days, it might be well to mention that dentistry was as crude as medicine. Dentistry, as it existed at that time, consisted primarily of pulling aching teeth. The extraction process consisted of a tussle between the dentist with his forceps, and the man with the aching tooth. At times the patient was lifted clear out of the chair in the effort to extract the tooth. This was usually followed by having someone else hold down or sit on the patient.

Though the methods of these pioneer doctors and dentists were crude and their knowledge was limited, they did the best they knew how, in an effort to make the lives of the early settlers a bit more secure. They fought disease, injury, and infection under conditions which people today would find hard to imagine. They also brought into this world the pioneer children who would later do their part in furthering the development of the West.

Surely, these frontier medical men deserve their own niche in the West's hall of fame.

OUT OF THE CHUTES

WHEN the rodeo champions were named for the year, plenty of rodeo fans, reading the name of Dean Oliver under calf-roping, looked up and asked, "Who's he?" 1955 was the first year that Dean stood high in the championships, so it's no wonder people were surprised that he ended up on top.

We've been running stories about the champions in these columns off and on, and this time we're going to answer that question about Dean Oliver—"Who's he?"

Well, he's a young man of 27 with twinkling blue eyes, a snub nose, a shy grin, an accurate arm with a catch rope, and lightning fingers with a pigging string.

It was no fluke, his winning the 1955 championship in calf-roping. In fact, his margin was more than 6,500 points over the runner-up, Lanham Riley. All year long it had been a hot race among those two and also the old pro, Toots Mansfield, and Ray Wharton, who finished third and fourth. But in the big, high-paying autumn rodeos, Dean got hotter than a firecracker and easily outstripped his rivals.

Plenty of people, as we've said, were surprised at the outcome—practically everybody except Dean Oliver.

Dean is proud to have been born in Dodge City, which he considers to be the cowboy capital of the world. After he grew up, however, he wanted to go farther West. He drifted out to Idaho and started working on ranches around there. Whenever he had some free time he practiced roping. Soon he was winning all the amateur rodeos around. The first one he remembers entering was a little show in Star, Idaho, in 1951.

"For a while," he says, "I didn't think about getting into professional rodeo. I was having fun, learning ranching, and dreaming about the day I'd be a big cattleman, not a champion calf-roper."

When he figured out how much it would cost him to get started ranching on his own, he began to think of competing for big money to get his stake. In 1953 he hit the professional rodeo circuit and started the climb that brought him to the top two years later.

Dean, who is married and has a 3-year-old daughter, has already started buying cattle. Every penny he can spare from his rodeo earnings goes into his dream.

Maybe he's thinking too much about ranching and not enough about roping, because his name isn't among the top ten in his event so far this year.

He hasn't been out of action, though. In fact he won the big calf-roping contest at Phoenix, Ariz., recently, against fourteen of the best cowboys in the field, including his rivals for the championship last year.

His time on six head was 105 seconds flat. Troy Fort finished next with 112.9. This was Dean's first major matched contest, and he was well aware of the stiff competition. None of his times was extra fast, but none of them was extra slow either, which was what eliminated his competitors.

Troy, the runner-up, had to take almost 27 seconds on his first calf, and that was too much to make up for, even with his great roping on his next five.

Dean handled all his calves well, and he demonstrated to the spectators the skill that made him champ. When he legs a calf, it stays put. He ties short, wraps fast, and then whips his hands down straight at his side to signal the timers.

And usually, whenever Dean's hands go down, the other ropers have a tough mark to shoot for.

Adios,

THE EDITORS.

FIVE GRAVES WEST

By PHILIP KETCHUM

THE STORY SO FAR: DOUG CALLANDER learns that his father SAM had stampeded his neighbor ROGER QUIGLEY's cattle, and was killed while resisting arrest for this crime. Doug's investigations convince him his father did lead the stampede—but only as revenge for Quigley's having had his men kill Sam's men during a trail drive, and steal the cattle. Doug helps Quigley's wife FRAN—who is in danger because she knows too much—to escape. Accused of kidnapping and murdering her, Doug runs from the law. But, backed by his father's men who are still left, Doug kidnaps Quigley's son BILL to make him confess to the ambush. He also kidnaps lawyer IRV COZAD, who he suspects of being the receiver of the money for the stolen cattle. On his arrival at the Callander ranch with his prisoners, Doug finds that HANNAH TOUISSANT, the girl he loves, has come there accidentally and is being held captive to prevent her talking.

CONCLUSION

ONLY one lamp was burning in the parlor. Its wick was turned low. It didn't give off much light, but its glow was bright enough to show the tight, angry expression on Hannah's face. Doug paced the worn carpet in the room, uneasy under Han-

nah's questioning, and regretting the chance that had brought her here. He was afraid, from her attitude, that nothing he could say would calm her down.

"Who are the men you took to the barn?" she asked.

"Two men we want to question."

"What if they don't answer your questions."

"They'll answer," Doug said grimly. "And maybe I'll keep you here, Hannah, and let you hear their answers."

This idea suddenly appealed to him. He nodded, took another turn around the room, and stopped, once more facing her. "Hannah," he said, "I'm going to tell you something that isn't generally known in the basin. A couple of months ago my father sent a herd to market in Springerville. Eight men were driving that herd. Kim Dugan was in charge of them. Maybe you knew Kim?"

"I did," she answered, "and I rather liked him. I could never understand why he sold the herd, kept the money, and skipped the country."

"No, that didn't happen," Doug said. "The men who left here with the herd didn't get to Springerville. When my father left here to find out what happened, he got his answer a day's drive north of town. He got his answer in five unmarked graves along the trail. There were three more graves he didn't find.

"All eight men who left here were killed. A crowd of Quigley's men took over the herd from there. Kim, and all those who were with him, were murdered. Vic Leighton, representing himself to be Kim Dugan, delivered the herd in Springerville and collected the money for it."

Hannah stiffened. "I don't believe it."

"Bill Quigley was one of the men with Leighton."

"No."

"I could name the others, too," Doug continued. "And I will, when the posse gets here in the morning. That is, I will if we get what I think we're going to get out of the two men you saw taken to the barn."

"Who are the two in the barn?" she asked finally.

"Bill Quigley and Irv Cozad."

"Mr. Cozad? But what did he have to do with it?"

"I don't know, for sure," Doug admitted. "It's my guess he was in Springerville to relieve Leighton of the money paid for the herd, but I'm not sure I'm right."

There was a knock on the door. Doug turned to answer it, and Hondo came in. He looked hesitantly at Hannah, as though not sure he could speak in front of her.

"Go ahead," Doug said. "What is it, Hondo?"

"Bill's talking," Hondo said. "Talking plenty."

"Then I'll be right out. What about Cozad?"

"He hasn't said a word."

Hondo left, and Doug glanced at the girl. "Want to stay here until morning?"

"I want to go out to the barn with you," Hannah said.

"It might not be pleasant. This is a dirty business, Hannah."

"I want to go to the barn," Hannah said again.

He shrugged and turned to the door. Hannah walked that way with him. He followed Hannah across the yard, opened the barn door, and stepped inside behind her. What he saw reminded him of the scene in Quigley's barn. Three lighted lanterns were hanging on pegs in the timbers supporting the roof. Irv Cozard stood against one of those timbers, tied there, his arms around it and behind his back. Bill Quigley lay flat on the ground. Hondo, Webber, and Andy Rawls stood above him. Bill's face was puffed, swollen, and streaked with blood and dirt.

Hannah caught her breath, only half smothering the cry in her throat. Hondo and Webber looked at her, but Cozad was watching Bill as though fascinated, and Andy Rawls, crouching above him, didn't move.

"Say that again," Andry growled.

"Cozad got the money," Bill said weakly. "I was there when Vic handed it over to him."

"Who else saw Vic Leighton pay Cozad?"

"No one else."

"Where was the money handed over?"

"In the alley back of the courthouse in Springerville."

"What else has Bill told you?" Doug asked.

"The whole story. He named those who were with him and Leighton the night of the murders. He told how they rode up to the fire after dark, each picking a man. They acted friendly and then, at a signal, opened up with their guns. Not one of the men had a chance. Those out with the herd did, but not much of a chance at that. They were outnumbered, and were ridden down and killed.

DOUG stepped forward. He knelt at Bill's side and asked, "Who planned it, Bill? Whose idea was it?"

"I don't know," Bill mumbled through puffed lips. "I didn't know where we were going when we set out."

"Maybe Cozad knows who planned it," Hondo suggested.

Doug stood up. He turned to face Cozard. "Do you?"

"Certainly I don't," Cozad said. "This is outrageous, Doug. You know how I feel about Quigley."

"I know how you say you feel."

The attorney straightened a little. "I've been honest and fair in everything I told you."

"You haven't been truthful," Doug snapped. "You said you hadn't been to Springerville recently. You were there the day Leighton sold our cattle."

"I'd forgotten about that trip. Anyhow, I didn't know it was the same day your herd reached Springerville. I was there on another matter, a case involving a water rights dispute on the Amity Creek."

"And you didn't meet Leighton in the alley back of the courthouse?"

"Certainly not. Bill lied about that. He and his father have always hated me."

Doug looked around at the others. "Who wants to try beating the truth out of Cozad?" he asked bluntly.

"I do," Hondo said.

"Match you for it," Webber suggested. "I'd love the chance to break my fist on his face."

Cozad moistened his lips. "I'll—I'll make a deal with you."

"What kind of deal?"

"I'll appear as your witness against Quigley if you agree to drop any charges against me."

Doug's eyes narrow thoughtfully. "Keep talking, Cozad," he suggested. "How would you appear against Quigley? What would you say?"

"I'd say Quigley sent me to Springerville to meet Leighton and pick up the money Leighton had, and that later I discovered the money was for the sale of your father's cattle."

"What did you do with the money?"

"Gave it to Roger Quigley."

Doug scuffed his boots in the dirt of the barn. He shook his head. "No, Cozad, that won't do. I'm not sure you could make it stick. I'm not sure you wouldn't change your story when you got into court. I want some tangible proof of what happened, something I can get my hands on. I'll give you half an hour to figure out what you want to do."

He turned away and glanced at the others. "I'm going to take Hannah back to the house. We'll make some coffee." He walked to where Hannah was standing, took her arm, and led her from the barn.

Hannah was shaky. When they reached the porch steps she stopped and looked up at him. "That was terrible in there," she said under her breath. "What had they done to Bill?"

"Beat him up," Doug answered.

"But he didn't have a chance."

"Neither did those eight men of ours who were killed near Springerville. I told you there was nothing pretty about a thing like this, Hannah."

"What will you do to Mr. Cozad if he doesn't tell you what you want to know?"

Doug said, "Cozad's in this deeper than I thought, and I don't understand it. What's the connection between him and Quigley?"

"Mr. Cozad is Mr. Quigley's attorney."

"He's the attorney for nearly everyone in the basin. I suppose he handled McAdams's legal work too. How did McAdams happen to sell out?"

"He was getting rather old. I think he grew tired of ranching, Doug."

"And how did Quigley come here?"

"He just—showed up one day. Maybe he had heard from someone that the McAdams ranch was for sale."

Doug shook his head. They seemed to be getting no place along this line. They went inside and into the kitchen. He shook out the fire and added more wood, while Hannah got water and fresh coffee for the pot on the stove.

After the coffee had boiled for a time, he watched Hannah pour some in a cup and taste it, then nod as though satisfied. She filled another cup for him, and one for herself.

"I'll bring in the men, two at a time," he told her. "Maybe we should have you around here to make coffee regularly."

She flushed, but shook her head. "Don't get any foolish ideas, Doug."

HE WALKED through the house and stepped into the yard. He crossed to the barn, sent Andy and Hondo to the house for coffee, and then, with Jim Lambert, stood facing Irv Cozad. Webber was now on guard outside. Bill lay motionless on the barn floor.

"Have you figured things out, Cozad?" he asked bluntly.

The attorney nodded. "I think we can get together."

"How?"

"You said you wanted tangible proof. I can offer it, in return for your pledge to bring no charges against me."

"What kind of proof?"

"The money paid to Leighton for your father's cattle—I'm holding it in my safe for Roger Quigley. There's nine thousand, two hundred and eighty-one dollars. Most of it is in bundles with the amount notations on slips of paper from the cattle buyer's office. That would help identify where the money came from."

"You say the money is in your safe? Why?"

"Quigley didn't want to put it in the bank. He didn't want to have to explain where it came from. He has a safe at the ranch, but it's a tin box compared to mine."

"So you're that close to him—close enough to hold his money?"

"I did it as his attorney, not because I'm close to him."

Doug heard someone running along the side of the barn. The door opened and Roy Webber looked in. "The posse's coming," he announced.

Doug stepped outside and stared down the road toward town. A string of about a dozen mounted men was coming this way.

He felt suddenly uneasy. When he had brought Bill Quigley and Cozad out here to the ranch, it had been with the idea of holding the two men somewhere until they could get the truth out of them, and at the same time to be in a place where they would have cover for themselves. He had hoped to get all the information he needed before the posse closed in, and he did have considerable information, but he was wondering now if the posse would listen to it. Certainly a posse dominated by Roger Quigley wouldn't want to listen.

"Everyone move to the ranch house," Doug ordered crisply. "Take Cozad and Bill Quigley with you. And hurry it. We haven't too much time."

From one of the bedroom windows, Doug watched the posse. They had pulled up at rifle shot distance from the house and were sitting their horses in a compact group, possibly discussing what plan to follow.

"Stay here and keep an eye on them, Andy," he ordered. "Let me know when they come on toward the house."

"We could let them ride closer," Andy said. "Then we could open up on them and knock half of them from the saddle before they knew what had happened."

"And the other half could pin us down here until they get help from town," Doug answered.

He went back into the other room. Bill Quigley, Liggett, and Cozad were lying on the floor, securely tied. Cozad wore a tight, mocking smile.

"When the posse gets here, let me talk to them," he said.

"And tell them what?"

"I'll talk them into taking you to Waggoner—alive."

Doug shook his head. He could be certain

of one thing—that it would be a mistake to let Cozad talk to the posse.

Andy came into the room. "They're riding this way," he said. "And they're all Quigley's men but two—the sheriff and Carl Schinn."

The posse was pulling into the yard. Doug could hear the sound of their horses. He glanced at Hannah. "Get down on the floor," he ordered. "If anyone starts shooting I don't want to have to worry about you."

She sat down, then stretched out on her back and looked up at him, smiling ruefully. "I feel awfully foolish lying here."

"Don't get up," Doug said.

He crossed to one of the front windows, Andy and Hondo following him. Webber and Jim Lambert, who were standing there, moved aside to make room for him.

Royce said something to Quigley, who was next to him, then raised his voice and called, "Doug! Doug Callander! Come outside. We want to talk to you."

"Just a minute," Doug shouted.

He glanced at Andy, recalling Andy's story of what had happened the night his father and brother were killed. The posse that night, led by Royce, had circled the house and had taken cover as they neared it. Then, from the security of what cover they could find, they had called on his father to surrender. This morning a posse led by the same man, had ridden boldly into the yard. There was only one way to account for this. They thought Doug was alone. He had planned to step outside and talk to Royce, and he still would do that, but now with more assurance than he had before.

TURNING to face the men grouped near him, he said, "We're going to run a bluff. Listen to what I say while I'm out on the porch. Two of you stay at this window, two move to the other. Break the windows when the time comes, and don't be slow about it. But no shooting unless they start it. We're going to gun cover the posse—and maybe we'll get away with it."

He loosened his holster gun, then walked to the door, opened it, and stepped out on the porch. He was covered by the guns of half the men out there the instant he appeared on the porch. Quigley was among those who swung a rifle on him, and the flushed, ugly look on the man's face told Doug how badly he wanted to squeeze the trigger.

Royce said grimly, "Like I told you on the way out here, Quigley, we're taking Doug in to stand trial."

"He can stand trial right here," Quigley grated.

Royce shook his head. "I'm leading this posse. I give the orders."

Quigley pulled in a long, deep, breath. He called, "Vic."

"Right here, Roger," Vic Leighton answered.

"Go ahead, Vic."

Leighton was slightly behind the sheriff, and to one side. He held his holster gun in his right hand. As Doug stood there on the porch, watching, Vic swung the gun on the sheriff and squeezed the trigger.

Royce had looked back at Vic, half turning in the saddle. That first shot Leighton fired ripped through his body and brought a hoarse, startled cry from his throat. He started to swing his rifle around but, before he could, Leighton fired again, as the sheriff's horse pitched forward and, feeling no restraining hand on the reins, danced away. Royce curled over the saddle, slid sideways, and plunged to the ground. Several of the other horses had been made restive by the shots, but the men mounted on them pulled them down and steadied them.

"You're going to get credit for that, Callander," Quigley was saying. "And unless you talk fast, you're going to get just what Royce got. I want the answer to two questions."

Doug moistened his lips. "What questions?"

"Where's Fran? Where's my wife?"

"On the way to Kansas City. I put her on the stage on the Springerville road."

Quigley stared at him for a moment as though weighing his answer, then finally nodded his head. "I had figured that out," he admitted. "But too late. Now one more question. Where's my son?"

Doug straightened. The minute he answered this second question he thought, he would die just as Royce had died.

"Before I tell you that, I want to say this. There's a rifle aimed at your head. The man who's holding it can't miss from where he's standing."

Quigley's eyes raked the front of the house. He shook his head. "I don't see any rifle aimed at me."

"I'm not talking about only one rifle," Doug said. "I'm talking about four. I don't know who the other rifles are aimed at."

He heard the sound of breaking glass, to his right, then to his left. He saw Quigley's glance again rake across the front of the house, and he noticed the way the man's body came up, and how his eyes had narrowed. Up to this moment, the curtains at the windows had hidden the men standing there. But now the curtains had been shoved aside, the windows broken, and four rifles were pointing into the yard. Four rifles couldn't knock down ten men, but each man out there had to worry about whether or not one was aimed at him.

Doug was leaning forward on the balls of his feet.

Every muscle in his body was tight. He knew he might not live another half minute but, while he had cards to play, he would play them for all they were worth.

"You can finish me, Quigley, any time you want to," he said clearly. "I know that. But the minute you do you'll die. Did you ever try ducking a rifle bullet?"

The shock Quigley was feeling was beginning to show. His face wasn't so red as it had been. A pallor was creeping under his skin.

His tongue licked out to moisten his lips, and he turned his head from side to side to stare at his companions. He could have ordered them to start firing through the windows, but it wasn't too hard for him to guess that, if he gave such an order, it would also be a signal to those inside to start shooting. He was caught in a stalemate.

"Who's in there?" he asked hoarsely.

"Four men who rode for my father, and who know about the graves on the Springerville road. You're going to stand trial for those murders, Quigley—you, and Leighton and Jelbert."

DOUG had the whip hand now and could sense it. There might be ten men there in the yard, each one armed and desperate, and in a shoot-out he would be one of the first to go down. But the advantage he held was much more real than the odds would indicate. It was bound up in the individual fear of each man here facing him, in the individual desire of each one to go on living.

"I'll cover them as they throw down their guns and dismount, one at a time," Doug called to Andy. "Keep your guns on the others. Leighton, you're first. Drop your gun, then slide to the ground and let your horse go."

Leighton hesitated for only an instant. Then his shoulders sagged, his gun fell from his hands, and he swung to the ground and stood there, his eyes still on Doug but the kill-crazy look gone from them.

"Now you, Quigley," Doug ordered.

"You can't get away with this, Callander," Quigley cried.

"Drop your rifle!" Doug barked. "Unbuckle your gun belt and let go of it. Swing to the ground."

Quigley's jaw worked up and down, but no sound came from his throat. He dropped his rifle, unbuckled his gun belt, and let it slide to the ground. Then, just as Leighton had done, he dismounted and stood facing the house, breathing heavily.

"Jelbert," Doug shouted, "it's your turn now." He swung his gun on Eli Jelbert.

It was Carl Schinn who started the trouble—Carl Schinn, the last man Doug would have picked for such a role. Perhaps Carl didn't really intend to do what he did. Later, in analyzing what had happened, it was figured that Schinn was terrified and thought only of getting away. But when he spurred his horse, it leapt forward, and he swung his gun arm up, maybe to keep his balance.

Those at the window, however, didn't have time to work it out. They saw the movement of his horse as it lunged against another one, and saw his lifting gun. A rifle spoke. It was only the first. On the edge of the crowd, Joe Nyatt took a desperate aim and fired through the nearest window, then started ducking down

around the side of his horse. He wasn't fast enough. A bullet from that window caught him through the shoulder.

From the porch, Doug saw the first ripple of the trouble. Then, as he shouted at Carl Schinn, urging not to try it, the pattern of what had been happening went to pieces. Three men wheeled their horses to streak away, but the others started blasting with their guns.

Doug felt the sting of a blow in the shoulder. It threw him sideways and staggered him against the house. As he hung there for a moment he caught a clear picture of what was going on: the three men racing away; Nyatt, Schinn, and another man reeling in the saddles of their plunging horses; a man already on the ground and running zigzag fashion toward the barn door; and Quigley and Leighton, whipping up the guns they had dropped and had scrambled to the ground to get.

Quigley was on his knees, and was staring at Doug across his leveled gun, screaming curses at him. As he slid to the floor, unable for some reason or other to stand erect any longer, Doug fired at him, and then fired again, then threw a shot at Jelbert, who was on his feet, the kill-crazy look again in his eyes.

Quigley was swaying from side to side, the gun in his hand making a wavering pattern in the air. He raised his other hand to steady it. Doug fired at him once more, then lifted his gun to fire at Jelbert. But the hammer clicked on an empty shell.

He decided that perhaps he hadn't needed another shot. Jelbert was staggering backward like a drunken man. A rifle shot from the house twisted him half around. Then a rifle cracked from the other window. It doubled Jelbert over and he pitched forward, away from the house, on his face. He didn't move again.

As suddenly as it had started, the shooting was over. Doug realized vaguely that Andy and Hondo and someone else had come out on the porch and were kneeling beside him. The someone else came, and he saw it was Hannah.

She was pulling at Andy's arm and was ordering, "Get him inside. Don't waste any more time seeing how badly he's hurt."

"There's no rush, Hannah," Doug said weakly.

He felt tired, terribly tired. The burning pain in his shoulder made him dizzy, but he was fighting the dizziness off. He stared into the yard again and saw that Quigley had fallen over on his side and was lying motionless. But he had taken long enough about it. He had died hard, just as he had lived.

"How are you feeling, Doug?" Hondo was asking.

"It's just a nick in the shoulder," Doug said.

"It looks like more than a nick to me," Andy said. "But it's not as bad as it might be."

"Bring him inside," Hannah said. "Don't kneel there talking."

"No," Doug said. "Wait a minute."

HE SCANNED the yard. A man lay twitching in the doorway to the barn, and there were three other prone figures in the yard besides Quigley, Jelbert and the sheriff. One was Joe Nyatt, one was Carl Schinn. Who the other was, Doug didn't know.

"Four got away," Andy said.

"Four?" Doug said. "I saw only three."

"No, there were four. But two seemed hurt as they rode away."

"Schinn's moving," Doug said, "and that other man is too."

"It's Jelbert. We'll take a look at them after we get you inside. Then one of us will head to town for a doctor."

Doug didn't argue any more about being helped into the house.

He dozed for a while after they took him to his father's room, and after Hannah, with Roy Webber helping her, had dressed the wound in his shoulder. Or perhaps he lost consciousness for a while. Which it was he never really knew, and it was unimportant. The effect was the same.

It was Andy who woke him, whose anxious voice made him snap out of it. "Doug," Andy was saying. "Doug, I hate to tell you this, but there's another crowd heading this way—maybe twelve or fifteen men."

Another posse? They couldn't stand off another one, but perhaps they wouldn't have to.

"Help me up," Doug said thickly.

"Nope," Andy said. "I'll talk to them. I just wanted to get your ideas, and if you came to and heard us, I wanted you to know what was going on. Hannah?"

"I'm right here," Hannah said from the doorway.

"Come in and see that he stays in bed."

"He'll stay," Hannah promised.

She came forward and sat on the edge of the bed. Andy walked to the door and from there looked back. "Joe Nyatt's still alive," he reported. "He hasn't talked much yet, but I think he will."

"The others?"

"Schinn's still living—and maybe those who got away are too. No one else is."

"Bill and Irv Cozad?"

"They're still tied up. Liggett is, too."

"Go see who's coming," Doug said. "Make any kind of deal you can to get them to listen to what we can tell them."

Andy left the room, nodding. After he was gone, Hannah said, "You just take it easy, Doug Callander. You've done enough. My heart was in my mouth every minute you were out there on the porch. When the firing started—"

"We almost got by with it," Doug said slowly. "The two most dangerous men in the crowd had caved in when Carl Schinn made his break. I wonder why he tried it. I suppose you never can tell about people. A brave man sometimes will break under pressure, a coward sometimes finds the courage to gamble."

"Stop talking," Hannah said, looking back at him and frowning.

"Who went for the doctor?"

"Hondo. And please stop talking; it just tires you. You may need your strength when the doctor gets here and starts probing for the bullet in your shoulder."

He heard the sound of horses in the yard, and then the muffled rumble of voices, but couldn't distinguish what was being said. Hannah went to the window and stood there.

"They're men from town," she said. "At least, most are from town. The one talking to Andy I never saw before. He's big, and about forty, and wearing a badge on his vest."

[*Turn page*]

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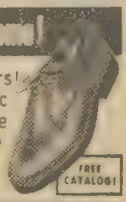

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Doug didn't know anyone who fit that description and wore a lawman's badge. He sat up, but the twinge of pain stabbing from his shoulder through his body made him dizzy. When Hannah hurried to his side and made him lie down, he didn't fuss with her about it.

"They're coming in," she told him. "And unless I'm mistaken, you don't have a thing to worry about. Now, behave yourself."

They didn't come directly to his room, but in about ten minutes Andy showed up in the doorway, a pleased look on his face. The stranger Hannah had seen through the window was with him.

"Doug, this is Ollie Grover," Andy said. "He works out of the United States Marshal's office in Santa Fe. He happened to be in Springerville on business. As I get it, while there he had a talk with Fran Quigley."

GROVER stepped into the room, nodding. He said, "Hello, Callander. You must have had quite a ruckus here this morning."

"We did," Doug admitted.

"I got into Waggoner on the early stage," Grover said. "When I learned that a posse had headed this way, I got a few men together and hurried after them. I was afraid I'd be too late, but it seems I wasn't needed at all."

"Then you understand what happened."

"And why it happened," Grover said. "But I had the story before I came here. I got it from Fran. She's quite a woman, isn't she?"

"Yes, she's quite a woman," Doug said.

"She's stubborn," Grover went on. "At first I wouldn't believe what she said about the graves on the trail above Springerville, but she kept after me until I got some men together and went up there and found them. I had another shock a few minutes ago. I took a look at the body of the man you called Roger Quigley. I knew him in Oklahoma by another name, Russ McKibbon. He broke out of prison, years ago, tried a bank holdup that failed, then dropped out of sight."

"A bank holdup that failed?" Doug repeated. "Then where did he get the money to buy a ranch in the basin?"

The answer came to him then. Cozad had put up the necessary money. Cozad was the evil genius back of all that had happened. But toward the end he must have come to fear Roger Quigley. That would account for his attempts to send Doug against the man.

If he had killed Quigley or Quigley had killed him, or if they had killed each other, Cozad was the one who would have benefited. The attorney could then have established his claim to the ranch Quigley had been running, and could have bought the Callander ranch which he had used Quigley to smash.

"I want to talk to Cozad," Doug said grimly.

"No, I'll talk to him," Andy said. "I know what's in your mind."

Late that afternoon, Grover again stood in the bedroom doorway. "We'll be leaving in a few minutes, Callander," he said. "I want to get Cozad to town and lodge him in jail. I'm taking McKibbon's son, too—or Bill Quigley, as you call him. Then we'll spend the next few days cleaning up the loose ends of the case and straightening out whatever charges there may be against you. Personally, I don't think you've much to worry about. What Cozad admitted makes it pretty clear that he's the one to carry the blame. When you're on your feet again, will you be heading to Kansas City?"

"Kansas City?" Doug said. "I don't think so."

He thought of Fran for a moment. She certainly was one of the most unusual women he had ever met, and she could fill a man's life with excitement. But what would he do in a place like Kansas City? He belonged in the wide-open country, in a place where there was room to turn around, and a man didn't have to wear a collar and a tie.

"See you in a few days, then," Grover said. "I reckon you'll be up soon. The doctor said there was no reason to worry about that hole in your shoulder."

"I'll be up tomorrow, if I can manage it," Doug said. "I have a ranch to run."

"And some good men to help you."

"The best."

"But no woman."

"Something can be done about that," Doug said.

He glanced to the window where Hannah was standing, and noticed the color which flooded her face. Grover laughed, waved to them, and turned away.

FIVE GRAVES WEST

Hannah remained at the window with her back to him. Doug stared at her. He told himself that a man could afford to remain single as long as he was batting around the country. But when he settled down to a permanent job, it was time to get married and put down roots.

"I'm going home," Hannah said after a moment.

"Then I'm getting up," Doug said.

She whirled around. "You can't. You mustn't. The doctor ordered—"

"The doctor said I was to have care."

She bit her lips. "But I must think about Marie."

"You have a woman looking after her."

"I'm her mother."

"Then send for her. There's room for her here."

"It wouldn't look right."

"It would look perfect to me," Doug said. "I think we ought to make it a permanent arrangement."

Again Hannah's face was ruddy with color. "Do you realize what you're saying, Doug?"

He nodded. "Come over here."

She took a step toward him, then stopped. "I have to have time to think it over."

"I'll give you five seconds; then I'm getting up," Doug said.

The bright look which came into her eyes made his heart beat faster. He started to sit up, but he didn't have to. She was beside him.

THE END

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 72)

1. Union Pacific.
2. Navajo Reservation.
3. Any camp in which cowboys "kept batch," but usually a line-camp held down by one lonely cowboy.
4. They are all varieties of cactus or other thorn bearers of the Southwest.
5. No. With few exceptions the telegraph lines stayed with the railroad.
6. Colorado.
7. "Little Joe, the Wrangler," by Jack Thorp.
8. Usually the man who breaks them to ride, though any cowhand in the outfit may do so on occasion, especially the wagon boss.
9. Riding aprons of leather or buckskin, worn as protection against cactus and thornbrush, but not having legs like chaps.
10. Six-shooter.

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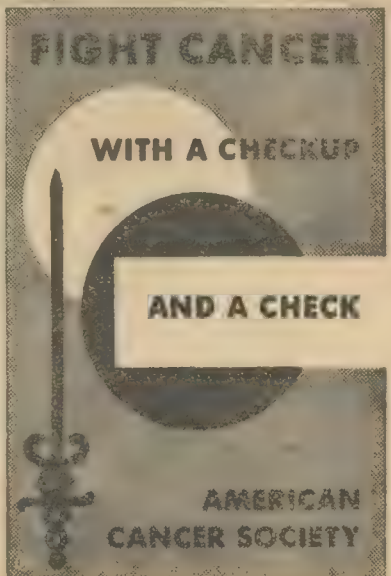

WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

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Virgo men find Aries women so exhilaratingly lovely, Taurian girls attractive in their faithfulness in love. Mercury girls can lead them a merry chase, and Cancer's domesticity and gentleness is compelling. Leo girls entertain and fascinate them. Libra girls answer a need for understanding and appreciation. Sagittarius women will provide the type of home Virgo needs. Capricorn ladies respond strongly to Virgo's well-organized routines. Aquarius women intrigue Virgo men by their demand for equality in all things, while Pisces ministers to Virgo's masculinity.

Aries men will provide Virgo women with excitement and stability. Taurus men possess and father them. Gemini men mystify Virgo girls. Cancer men protect them. Leo leads them through life with loving concern. Libra brings the thrill of complete understanding to them. Scorpio men fascinate, frighten, and fascinate them some more. Sagittarius men comfort them on the rebound. Capricorn men teach Virgo how to live. Aquarius can rankle them into worthwhile action. Pisces men contribute to their peace of mind and soul.

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- ☐ Auto Elec. Technician
- ☐ Auto-Engine Tune Up
- ☐ Automobile Mechanic

AVIATION
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft & Engine Mechanic

BUSINESS
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Bookkeeping and Accounting
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Public Accounting
- ☐ Creative Salesmanship
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ Letter-writing Improvement
- ☐ Office Management
- ☐ Professional Secretary
- ☐ Retail Business Management
- ☐ Sales Management
- ☐ Stenographic-Secretarial
- ☐ Traffic Management

CHEMISTRY
- ☐ Analytical Chemistry
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chem. Lab. Technician
- ☐ General Chemistry
- ☐ Natural Gas Prod. & Trans.
- ☐ Petroleum Engineering
- ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

CIVIL, STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Construction Engineering
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Reading Struct. Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

DRAFTING
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mine Surveying and Mapping
- ☐ Plumbing Drawing and Estimating
- ☐ Structural Drafting

ELECTRICAL
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electrical Maintenance
- ☐ Electrician ☐ Contracting
- ☐ Lineman

HIGH SCHOOL
- ☐ Commercial ☐ Good English
- ☐ High School Subjects
- ☐ Mathematics

LEADERSHIP
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Leadership and Organization
- ☐ Personnel-Labor Relations

MECHANICAL AND SHOP
- ☐ Gas—Electric Welding
- ☐ Heat Treatment ☐ Metallurgy
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Internal Combustion Engines
- ☐ Machine Design-Drafting
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Machine Shop Practice
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Quality Control
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Sheet Metal Worker
- ☐ Tool Design ☐ Toolmaking

RADIO, TELEVISION
- ☐ Industrial Electronics
- ☐ Practical Radio TV Eng'r'ng
- ☐ Radio and TV Servicing
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Television Technician

RAILROAD
- ☐ Air Brake Equipment
- ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Engineer & Fireman
- ☐ Section Foreman

STEAM AND DIESEL POWER
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Diesel—Elec. ☐ Diesel Eng's
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Stationary Fireman
- ☐ Stationary Steam Engineering

TEXTILE
- ☐ Carding and Spinning
- ☐ Cotton, Rayon, Woolen Mfg.
- ☐ Finishing and Dyeing
- ☐ Loom Fixi'g ☐ Textile Des'ing
- ☐ Textile Eng'r'g ☐ Throwing
- ☐ Warping and Weaving

MISCELLANEOUS
- ☐ Domestic Refrigeration
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Ocean Navigation
- ☐ Professional Engineering
- ☐ Short Story Writing
- ☐ Telephony

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